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Shaman You

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Making Magic
Monday, March 24, 2008



Welcome to Shaman Week! It's kind of like Wizard Week but more focused on red and green. Let me start today's column by admitting that I had no idea what I was going to write about when I sat down. My fallback for random theme weeks when I don't know what to do is type the word in question into Gatherer and start telling stories about individual cards that fall into the themed category. But I just did that last month for [Warrior Week](#) and it didn't seem right to go back to the "well" so soon.

I dug in deep and decided to figure out what is the most interesting thing about Shamans that I could discuss. There really wasn't any overarching design constraints to designing Shamans that I thought would make interesting reading. There's wasn't a witty tale of how the creature type came to be. In fact, the more I dug into the topic the less I was able to latch onto. Finally, out of frustration, I said to myself, "%*&ing Shamans. Why couldn't they just be Wizards?!"

And like that my mental logjam was broken (apparently swearing seems to help me with that): why do Shamans even exist? Why aren't they Wizards? Which goes into a much more basic point: why do we (being the people who make the game) bother to break things into multiple categories? Why do we subdivide ideas into smaller sub-ideas when they could all be classified together? And trust me, as you will see, we do this all over the place. Today's column is all about answering why. Yes, before this column is over I will answer the ultimate Shaman question: Why not have every magic-user be a Wizard?

Walk of Shaman

I often talk about how I believe the heart of the game is the color pie. Everything in the game (flavor, mechanics, iconics, etc.) is derived from the color pie. (If you haven't, by the way, had a chance to read my five part series on the color philosophies I heartily recommend you do so—here they are: [white](#), [blue](#), [black](#), [red](#), and [green](#).) I believe this issue goes to the core of why the color pie exists.

When Richard Garfield first created **Magic**, I believe the initial idea that started the ball rolling was the idea of designing a trading card game. What does it mean to have the game be "bigger than the box," that is, larger than any one player's components? What ramifications come along with a game where the designer makes the pieces but the players create the game? Richard's answer for this was that the game had to be about discovery. A key part of the game was that there was a game outside the game (called a metagame by Richard—and no, I don't mean the tournament definition about what deck archetypes to expect). Much of the game of **Magic** was about this metagame. The act of discovering the world of the game was as much the game to Richard as the game itself. (This is, by the way, why early **Magic** didn't tell the players what anything was; rarities, card numbers, card names—none of it was released by Wizards.)

If the game was about discovery, Richard knew that it thus had to also be about definition. Players needed structure to help them make their maps. Elements of the game had to clump together to allow players to have a handhold on what to do. In addition, Richard had come up with this very interesting mana system (what you might all know as lands, mana, and playing spells). This mana system allowed the game to naturally be broken up into parts as each part would have its own type of mana. This in turn was very important because it also allowed a means to keep all the most powerful spells from ending up in the same deck. In the end, the color pie served as the checks and balances for the game as well as its infrastructure.

What does this have to do with the topic at hand? Everything. The color pie came into existence because the game needed to have definition. This need for definition nestled in the core of **Magic** has blossomed and interwoven itself into just about every aspect of the game.

Living with the Shaman

The Wizard / Shaman issue is mostly a creative one but before I get there, let me start by talking about the mechanical ramifications of what I've just described. While we are constantly striving to find new nooks and crannies in the game, when push comes to shove, the game has basically a few dozen effects. Note I'm making grand categorizations. These categories have lots of room for subdividing, which of course is our topic of the day.



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As an example, let me take one of the most fundamental ones: creature removal. This accounts for a lot of cards as creatures are the backbone of the game. (To try and cut off a little mail, I'm not dissing creatureless decks, I'm just talking about where the game lives from an abstract design viewpoint; creatures are fundamental to the structure of **Magic**.) To help keep things interesting we have created several substantial subgroups that we've allotted to different parts of the color pie.

Straight destruction: These are the cards that just outright destroy a creature. They have no subtlety. They don't require any sideways mumbo-jumbo. The card just says on it "kill that." We've given this ability to black. It's the color of death and decay so it seemed only right to allow black to destroy creatures the blunt way. Most often we put restrictions on this kind of destruction, "nonblack" being the most prevalent. The reason behind this is that it tends to make things more interesting from a game perspective if spells and effects have areas they are ineffective against. Back in the day, a lot more colors had "straight destruction" cards but over the years as we've fine-tuned the color pie we've narrowed most of it down to just black.

Remove from game: This is the closest cousin to straight destruction. It doesn't destroy your creature; it just puts it somewhere that's no longer in play. Because this is fundamentally stronger than straight destruction (there are a lot more ways to return from a graveyard than the "removed from the game" zone—yes, I really, really hate that name), we tend to temper it by putting lots of restrictions on it. The largest restriction ties into the philosophy of white, the color that gets most of these effects. Usually white can only deal with creatures that are messing with it be it attacking them, blocking their creatures or using their spells to cause white's things harm. With great power there must also come great responsibility.

Direct damage: This is obviously red's part of the pie (although other colors like white and black get to nibble). This is destruction based on dealing damage. The weakness tied to this type of kill is that it gets weaker as creatures get tougher. The advantage is that it can also be applied to players.



Toughness reduction: This category kills creatures by using an important state-based effect: creatures with 0 or less toughness die. This ability is mostly in black but bleeds a little into red.

Temporary threat removal: This category includes enchantments (mostly) that prevent a creature from attacking, blocking and/or using its activated abilities. The creature isn't destroyed, just neutralized. The key difference to this kind of removal is that it can more easily be undone. Most of the above types of removal are hard to undo. This type merely requires some form of enchantment removal. And yes, this category belongs mostly in white.

Lockdown: This category includes permanents that keep another permanent from untapping. This will neutralize most creatures and non-creatures with tapping costs in their activation. This ability is mostly blue with a little bleed from white and green.

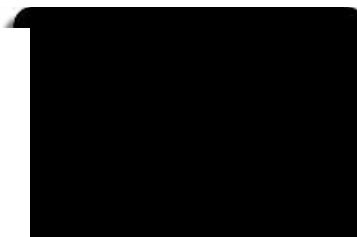
Forced fighting: This ability makes use of creatures as tools of destruction. Using things like provoke or the "Tracker ability," this category uses one creature to destroy another by, well, forcing a fight. This category falls mostly in green, the color that traditionally has the least amount of removal.

Deathtouch: This is the one creature keyword, that out and out kills creatures. (Hey it's in the name and everything.) This ability is in black and green.

I'll stop here as the categories start getting murkier as to whether they count as creature removal or not (for instance, what many players refer to as "sideways" creature removal such as **Giant Growth** and **Unsummon**). The reason I spelled this all out was to make the following point. There are numerous ways in **Magic** to say "I am going to remove that creature as a problem," yet we go way out of our way to keep them very segmented by color. Why do we do that?

Several reasons:

1. **Colors need mechanical flavor.** An important part of what makes the color pie work is that it divvies up the pieces of the game such that players have to pick and choose what they want. Choosing a color gains you access to certain abilities and keeps you from accessing others. Going a little deeper, choosing a color can dictate how you deal with certain aspects of the game. Let's explore this by looking at creature removal. The choices above give a very different spin for each color.



White – White tends to use its removal defensively. Also, it tends not to actually kill things, opting instead to send them away or to neutralize them. On the plus side, this helps white be very defensive. On the down side, white often has problems with dealing with certain types of creatures, particularly those that benefit the opponent without directly interacting with the white mage.

Blue – Blue has very little creature removal. To deal with creatures it has to rely on its other bag of tricks from counterspells to "bounce" (aka **Unsummoning**) to stealing creatures.

Black – Black is one of the best at outright creature destruction. That said, it has certain blind spots such as protection, shroud, and its frequent inability to deal with black creatures.

Red – Red is also very good at creature destruction, but as it has to rely on damage. It too has some gaping holes particularly with creatures with high toughnesses.

Green – Along with blue, green is the worst color at creature removal. It has to rely mostly on its creatures to kill other creatures in combat.



By creating subsets for the creature removal, we greatly enrich the overall feel of the game. The colors have clear definition which allows strengths and weaknesses to come through.

2. *The game needs variance.* One of the qualities that most sets apart trading card games from other types of games is the huge amount of variance that naturally occurs in the game. Because there are so many variables from what cards get put into the deck all the way down to the huge amount of decisions that get made each game, **Magic** games are very different from game to game. The subsetting we're talking about is another important element that helps create this variance. The fact that black spells get rid of creatures in slightly different ways than red, for instance, makes playing against a black deck a very different experience than paying against a red deck. Even within colors, having a **Dark Banishing** versus having an **Enfeeblement** helps add to this variance.

3. *It creates more design space.* We could just stick to straight destruction as our creature removal, but doing so would cut off thousands and thousands of potential cards. And remember that having different subsets doesn't just make more creature kill cards, it also begets more answers to those cards. Much of the definitions of the colors come from giving them answers to their enemies' threats. White, as an example, makes great use of protection from black and red because it acts as a good answer to black and red's creature removal.

My point is that making clear-cut differences between various subsets makes for a better game.

Look of Shaman

So the design needs to be able to stratify all the subsets of any mechanical component to help improve the game. Now let's move the conversation to Creative. And you know what? Pretty much everything I said above about mechanics holds true for flavor. Let me give an example. Why not make every humanoid creature in **Magic** a human? There are fantasy worlds in which the only humanoids are humans. Why not do that for **Magic**?

I guess the first reason is that it would make the game less dynamic creatively, a.k.a. more boring. We make hundreds of creatures every year about half of which are humanoid. If each of those were a human it would get monotonous pretty fast. Plus, fantasy has so many rich races to play with. There are goblins and elves and dwarves and orcs and zombies, etc. Combine that with the fact that we make thousands and thousands of cards and you can see the need to take advantage of all the fantasy genre has to offer.

This, of course, ties back into the game's core element of discovery. In fact, I will argue that the creative has an even more important role than mechanics in this regard. Why? Because when push comes to shove a certain portion of the mechanics are the same. Yes, we vary how we do direct damage each set but every set has it. As it does counterspelling and discard and enchantment removal and card drawing. Because a certain portion of each set is revisiting the same basic ideas, it is the job of Creative to make those things feel different. (And to be fair, small tweaks by design do help things feel mechanically different.) In addition, adding subsets in the creative does increase the variance of the creative and help create more veins for creative work. If every humanoid was a human, it's a lot more work making the five thousandth one feel different.

Which finally brings us back to the Shaman creature type. While the word Shaman has shown up on cards since the early days, the creature type itself only dates back to *Mirrodin*. Quick trivia question: *Why Mirrodin?*

Right, because it was the beginning of the race/class model. (Good job.) Shaman didn't exist as a creature type until Creative needed to flesh out the classes. When they did, they found the following problem. Two basic classes showed up in too high a volume—Soldier and Wizard. When you step back for a second, the reasons seem kind of obvious. **Magic** is a game about fighting with magic. It seems only logical that the game is filled with creatures that fight and creatures that do magic.

Why were there *too* many? For most of the reasons I stated above. The game is at its best when categories are subcategorized. Having a single creature type take up too large of a percentage causes various problems. Mechanically having too many creatures available makes it harder to make cards that focus on that subset because it becomes too powerful. Part of what keeps tribal mechanics in check is that it forces restrictions on the deck builder. (This, by the

way, is one of the ongoing issues we have with the Human creature type, as historically they represent a much larger chunk than any other creature type. This in turn was one of the reasons we chose to not have humans in Lorwyn.)

From a flavor standpoint, there's the concern of stretching the focus. If "Wizard," as an example, has too many different meanings, it's hard to give definition to the concept of a Wizard. The Shaman creature type was created because the creative team was trying to help sub-categorize the types of magic-users in the game. As tends to happen with flavor, things fall along color lines. Wizards were defined as more formally trained. They went to schools and studied their craft. Shamans have a more wild connection to their magic. What this means is that white and blue magic users tend to be Wizards while red and green magic-users are more likely to be Shamans. Black falls in the middle and thus tends to split which direction it goes based on the concept of the card at hand. Note that any color can make use of either type if the flavor lines up.

Hall of Shaman

We are bonded by our similarities; we are defined by our differences. **Magic** needs both. Shamans exist because just having everything be Wizards would make for a lesser game. And that, my faithful readers, is what I have to say for Shaman Week.

Join me next week when we start *Shadowmoor* previews.

Until then, may you find joy in your differences.

Mark Rosewater

But Wait, There's *Shadowmoor*

Did I just say next week is the beginning of *Shadowmoor* previews? Let me go check. Why yes, I did. You know what that means, it's time for my patented preview teases that I do the week before the previews start.

Here are a few things you can expect in *Shadowmoor*:

(For first timers, be warned that while everything that follows is completely true, I'm purposely being sneaky and not telling you everything. You've been forewarned.)

Shadowmoor contains:

- The word "indestructible"—on a common
- A blue sorcery with the text "Take an extra turn after this one" and a mana cost of $\{1\}$
- A creature that's the third black-bordered creature to have its keyword ability
- A rare cycle built around one of my favorite words (although the word itself only actually shows up in print on one of the five cards; cursed templaters!)
- A black sorcery that has three targets and creates six counters
- A rare white sorcery with just four words in its rules text
- A card that gives protection from something never granted before—and not to a permanent
- The expression "+20/+20 until end of turn"
- And the introduction of "Q"; never has something so simple been so brain melting (one more hint: Q's a thing, but not a keyword mechanic)

Here are a few names of *Shadowmoor* cards:

- Gnarled Effigy
- Kitchen Finks
- Kithkin Rabble
- Midnight Banshee
- Worldpurge
- Wort, the Raidmother

And finally, here is new art for an old favorite:





If any of this tickles your fancy, make sure to come back next week when previews begin.

*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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