



Cephalopods of the Multiverse

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Magic the Gathering (MTG) is a popular trading and collectible card game, first published by Wizards of the Coast in 1993. Although the game now spans many formats and game types, the core concept pits two players “Planeswalkers” against each other, drawing power (mana) from plains, swamps, mountains, forests and islands to summon creatures and cast spells to battle and defeat opponents. The game has a complex and ever evolving set of rules. Wizards of the Coast regularly release new sets and blocks introducing new cards, mechanics and lore to the rich Multiverse, the planes of existence that Planeswalkers can travel between, that makes the games setting.

One aspect of the game which arguably underpins the continued success of MTG is the vibrancy and colour which gives flavour to the complex ruleset of the game. Storylines featuring several recurring characters, normally Planeswalkers, are told across novelisations, through flavour text and the beautiful artwork of the cards. The designers and artists liberally take inspiration for the denizens of the Multiverse from wider science-fiction, fantasy and of course the natural world.

Although your average game of MTG may feature battles between Inexorable Blobs,

hammer wielding cat wizards and goblin bombers, more zoologically minded Planeswalkers may summon an Allosaurus, Hammerhead Shark or a Grizzly Bear or two to the fray. Of course, as numerous *Journal of Geek Studies* papers have highlighted (Salvador, 2014, 2018; Cavallari, 2015; Salvador & Cunha, 2016), cephalopod molluscs have also inspired the designers of MTG and this paper will look at known cephalopods from the Multiverse with some comments on differences between their biology and the cephalopods we’re more familiar with on our humble plane.

HERE WON’T BE KRAKENS

‘Squid’, octopuses and nautilus have all featured in MTG so far on creature, other spell and even Planeswalkers cards. Krakens are also a creature type within the Multiverse but differ from the Kraken of historical and contemporary mythology, normally associated with giant squid or squid-like creatures. In MTG krakens are giant, island destroying, beasts which show a diversity of cetacean, arthropod and molluscan features amongst others. For this reason, krakens get an honourable mention here but won’t be examined as the mutating magical

powers of the deep sea defy current systematic reasoning.

Mirroring trends in scientific research and literature on cephalopods, although they are culturally important organisms they make up a small niche of known creatures in the Multiverse. Unlike other creature types which have been a mainstay in MTG sets, cephalopod cards are comparatively rare. Cephalopod-themed cards were published as early as 1997 but it's only comparatively recently that enough cards have been produced to attempt an all-cephalopod themed standard 60-card deck.

The different cards will be examined in a hybrid taxonomic and card type order starting with creature cards then moving onto enchantments, Planeswalkers and sorcery types. In total, excluding reprinted cards and art variants, there are 21 cephalopod-themed cards currently published for MTG: 14 creatures, 2 sorceries, 2 enchantments, 2 tokens and 1 Planeswalker.

A NOTE ON POWER LEVELS

In MTG the comparative power, strength and endurance of different creatures is expressed as a number on the bottom right hand of creature cards. The numerator represents the power of a creature (the amount of damage it can do by punching, slicing, psychically tormenting or oozing on a defending creature) and the denominator represents toughness (the amount of punching etc. it can take).

The power levels of various creatures of the Multiverse is the subject of much debate and mirth amongst players but for this paper the Grizzly Bear with the power/toughness 2/2 will be used as a baseline to make inferences about

analogies between cephalopods from other planes and our own.

CREATURES: NAUTILOIDEA

Perhaps unfairly maligned as hangers-on or 'living fossils' on our plane, today's diversity of living species of nautiluses, the only externally shelled cephalopods, have inspired philosophers, artisans and scientists for centuries. The exact species diversity and relationships between them is still in flux, compounded by the difficulty in accessing and studying these organisms.

There are just two nautiluses in MTG, the **Chambered Nautilus**, which shares its name with a generic name used to refer to the whole living group, or sometimes, specifically *Nautilus pompilius*, and the **Crystalline Nautilus** (Fig. 1). Much like living nautiluses, which are nationally and internationally protected by law, the flavour text for chambered nautilus suggests that their shells are also exploited by jewellers on some planes at least:

"What's merely a home for the nautilus can become exquisite jewelry in the hands of Saprazzan artisans."

— Flavour text from Chambered Nautilus card.

Chambered nautiluses are 2/2 creatures in MTG and the card art shows one giving a merfolk an unwanted cuddle. The art and power level suggests that Magic's nautiluses are significantly larger than living ones. Interestingly, they share a fleshy hood, numerous tentacles and a lenseless eye complete with iris groove for channelling mucus (Muntz, 1987).



Figure 1. The nautiluses. Source: Gatherer.

By contrast the crystalline nautilus, masterfully depicted by artist Brad Rigney, suggests extreme adaptation unlike that of known nautiloid species. In the first instance, the crystalline nautilus is both a creature and enchantment and is shown with a vivid pearlescent shell similar to polished shells of nautiluses. The soft tissue anatomy is consistent with known species of *Nautilus* and *Allonautilus*; however, the crystalline nautilus is shown moving at speed over the surface of the water. This has never been documented in known species and furthermore, from the depiction, the hyponome plays no part in this high speed aquaplaning mode of locomotion. A power and toughness of 4/4 suggests that crystalline

nautilus is significantly more durable and powerful than *Magic's* chambered nautilus too.

CREATURES: 'SQUID'

As a general term, squid is often used for decapodiform cephalopods excluding cuttlefish which is not a natural grouping of these soft-bodied cephalopods. There are three squid creatures in MTG and two squid producing creatures. With the exception of Gulf Squid, the squid appear to have corneal membranes and are classified, albeit tentatively, here as myopsid squid.

The three squid creatures in MTG are the **Fylamarid**, **Sand Squid** and the intriguing **Gulf Squid** (Fig. 2). Sand Squid appear the most similar to known myopsid species albeit

significantly larger than any known decapodiform cephalopod, depicted embracing a human-sized creature with thick, flat arms. Fylamarids are flying squid which appear to have evolved true sustained flight beyond the shorter bursts of flight in species of flying squid

(Muramatsu et al., 2013) with adaptations of large wing like projections underneath the siphon region, huge lateral fins and vampire squid-like filament arms alongside usual arm array. The tentacles appear to have been lost, but they can squirt ink.



Figure 2. MTG's 'squid' cards including the presumably misclassified ~~Omastar~~ **Gulf Squid**. Source: Gatherer.

Although the Gulf Squid has been categorised as a squid by MTG (presumably informed by scholars from across the Multiverse), the gulf squid possesses a large ornamented spiral shell suggesting an ammonoid affinity or convergence. The direction of shell coiling with relation to the position of the aperture as well as the skin colour, suggests a close resemblance to another well-known fictitious cephalopod (Salvador, 2014). Further study of this group is required to confirm relationship with other known cephalopods from the Multiverse.

Likewise, **Chasm Skulkers**, categorised by MTG as a 'squid horror' also defies known relationships within Cephalopoda. Upon the death of a Chasm Skulker, a number of 1/1 squid creatures are created. It is unknown if these are symbiotic or parasitic cephalopods, who attack on the death of their 'host', or spontaneously created with magical forces. The last 'squid' card gives some insight into ecology in the oceans of different planes, summoning a **Coral Barrier** also brings with it a 1/1 squid creature consistent with reef species in our plane.



Figure 3. The octopuses, with fourth wall breaking Jules Verne quote on this printing of the card. Source: Gatherer.

CREATURES: OCTOPODA

In terms of types of octopuses in MTG, which in some cases seems to be analogous to species, octopuses are the most speciose of known cephalopods from the Multiverse. There are six octopus creatures. Like cephalopods in our plane, the Multiverse also seems to be plagued with problematic naming conventions when it comes to octopus types.

In order of power, **Crafty Octopus** (Fig. 3) is the weakest octopus card, but like living species, makes up for it in terms of brain power. In addition to showing an advanced range of tool use, Crafty Octopus is also wearing glasses, steadfast evidence of intelligence in ethological studies.

The next octopus in terms of power is the **Giant Octopus** (Fig. 3), depicted at a size larger

than buildings and capable of destroying ships with their arms. Although certainly giant by comparison to the largest known species of octopuses in our plane, the name may be a misnomer as they are the second smallest type of octopus in MTG, and therefore not biologically giant as defined by Klug et al. (2015). The flavour text for the various reprints of this card tell us many things. Firstly, that calamari is appreciated across the Multiverses and secondly with a quote from Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, that this influential volume has somehow also made its way across the Multiverse (or perhaps Verne walked the planes?).

Tied at 5/5 power and toughness are the ship-crushing **Sealock Monster** and multi-mouthed **Godhunter Octopus** (Fig. 4). Studying

specimens of this size would have huge implications for understanding the evolution of colossal size in coleoid cephalopods. From a restricted glimpse of Godhunter octopuses, it

appears they possess numerous toothed mouth-like openings, superficially similar to toothed sucker rings.



Figure 4. The octopod monsters, depicted destroying people, boats and mountains? Source: Gatherer.

Moving up the power scale, the **Elder Deep-Fiend** (Fig. 4) is next, literally bursting from inside another creature which is handy in a pinch. The Elder Deep-Fiend shows some interesting anatomy similar to Godhunter Octopus with a toothed maw on the surface of the mantle rather than in the centre of arms. However, it's important to note that this octopus is a physical manifestation formed from the ceaseless hunger of titans from the Blind Eternities so adherence to biological principles is not necessarily a given.

The last of the octopus creatures is **Lorthos, the Tidemaker** (Fig. 5) a whopping and cephalopod-theme pleasing 8/8 legendary creature. Unfortunately, last seen being

dismembered by an Eldrazi titan, this unique specimen is presumed lost to science (Digges, 2015).

SORCERIES, ENCHANTMENTS & PLANESWALKER KIORA

In addition to summoning creatures to go head to head with each other in magical conflicts, Planeswalkers can also use a variety of spells to tip the table in their favour and control the field of play. They can also summon other Planeswalkers to assist in battles. There are a number of cephalopod spells in MTG but unfortunately, their magical and ethereal nature defies existing classification systems and biological concepts.



Figure 5. Lorthos. Source: Gatherer.

Crush of Tentacles (Fig. 6; although crush of cephalopod arms appears to be more accurate) is a powerful sorcery spell that makes all other creatures disappear and, if you've got the mana to spare, summons an 8/8 octopus to boot. **Octopus Umbra** (Fig. 6) is an enchantment aura that can be used to give other creatures 'the

power of Octopus' boosting them to 8/8 power and toughness with the ability to shut down creatures with a power less than 8 (see what they did there?).

Then there are two spells and one creature which cause pause for thought on cephalopod taxonomy. **Quest for Ula's Temple** (Fig. 6), **Whelming Wave** and summoning **Slinn Voda** all affect creature types. Quest for Ula's Temple becomes a tidal wave of creatures and the other two remove certain creatures from play. Interestingly, octopuses are the only cephalopods affected by these alongside aforementioned Krakens, Leviathans and Serpents. Quite why it's only octopuses and not all cephalopods which are affected is currently unknown. Interestingly, Whelming Wave summons a... err... whelming wave, but octopuses are spared from its destructive power. This then allows them to take over the land presumably as happened recently in Wales (Ward, 2017).



Figure 6. Cephalopod flavoured spells: Quest for Ula's Temple, Octopus Umbra, Crush of Tentacles [sic]. Source: Gatherer.



Figure 7. Both depictions of Planeswalker Kiora A.K.A. ‘The one with all the fan art’. Source: Gatherer.

The last cephalopod-themed card worth mentioning is Planeswalker Kiora. A merfolk Planeswalker, she has the power to summon 8/8 octopuses into battle and is depicted in both her Master of the Depths and Crashing Wave (Fig. 7) as keeping a suckered beast or two on hand at all times. A must-have ally for those wanting to literally bring more arms to the fight.

SO LONG SUCKERS

As of the time of writing, these are all the known cephalopod and cephalopod-related creatures, spells and Planeswalkers from the MTG Multiverse. In this examination there is some biological conservatism across planes of existence when it comes to cephalopod biology, anatomy and ecology. There are also some

marked differences, which although may be biologically questionable, implausible or indeed impossible, they make for a fun game. There are still plenty of cephalopods yet to draw inspiration from including early fossil forms, cuttlefish, ram’s horn squid and bobtail squid. Here’s hoping that many more cephalopods will be making their way to a card table soon.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Carnall is a natural history curator specialising in all living things across time which isn't really a specialism. As a museum curator he knows better than most that there is no prying apart popular culture and science as they both feed on and into each other. All animals are the best but cephalopods are more best.