

TCG Hour: A Day in the Life of a Magic Designer

With Bill Rose and Daneen McDermott

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TSRO_Durst: So, what inspires a designer? What things do you do to help stimulate your imaginations?

Wotc_Bill: I don't really know what inspires me. When I design a set, I design about 300 cards and then playtest them. Afterwards, half get cut. Repeat the process a couple of times, and maybe you get something good.

WotC-Daneen: Bill works on the rules end of the cards, I work on the names, flavor text, and some art. For me, music is a good source of inspiration, but usually it's just, "what if . . ."

WOTC_Mel: How long does it take to come up with 300 cards, Bill?

Wotc_Bill: Along with Mark Rosewater and Mike Elliott (two other **Magic** designers) I designed *Invasion*, our next large set, in about a week. This was rare. Sometimes it takes 3 months.

WotC-Daneen: But names, flavor text, and art take about 4 months.

Markkus: What are the guidelines for card creation? Are there any boundaries that are not to be crossed?

Wotc_Bill: For design—no. Guidelines and boundaries are set in development.

WotC-Daneen: Bill, maybe you should explain the difference between design and development

Wotc_Bill: In design we do whatever is interesting to us. We follow rough boundaries because we know that the developers will kill ideas that are too wacky.

Markkus: So . . . no purple mana?

Wotc_Bill: Many good **Magic** cards have come from ideas that are too wacky to publish. We play, redesign, play, and then redesign some more. The end idea may not look like the beginning wacky idea.

WOTC_Mel: Developers have to make your ideas work?

Wotc_Bill: Developers focus on taking the flavor and ideas of the design and making sure that the set is balanced, not too confusing, and interesting to play.

WotC-Daneen: Then the rest of the team jumps in to make the art, names, and flavor text all jive with the rules.

Wotc_Bill: Purple mana has been discussed in design; to date it has never made it into development.

WOTC_Mel: Which comes first, incidentally, the art, the name, or the flavor text?

WotC-Daneen: It differs for different cards.

Wotc_Bill: Sometimes ideas from design are great but they're too confusing to explain in a few short sentences. We then need to scrap the idea.

WotC-Daneen: We start with concepts for a story at the same time Bill's design team puts their ideas together. We (the card naming/flavor text team) look at each card while the developers are tweaking them.

Wotc_Bill: No, seriously, a sixth color of **Magic** has been discussed. Richard Garfield is currently working on a design team (for the October 2001 set). He and others have been discussing a sixth **Magic** color. Most likely the six color won't make it out of design, but other ideas from talking about the sixth color will.

WOTC_Mel: Do you have to check places like usenet and other games out there to make sure you don't accidentally have a card with a mechanic that has already been done?

Wotc_Bill: No we don't. We can't even if we wanted to. I've had cards submitted to me that have already been proposed by R&D and by other outside designers.

WotC-Daneen: Actually, these guys are virtual walking encyclopedias of **Magic**.

Markkus: How many cards in new sets are related to an older set's strategy or creatures?

Wotc_Bill: Design is not about a single card, but about a game mechanic and a game environment.

Wotc_Bill: Related is relative. Sometimes, ideas seem very similar to developers—flying versus shadow for instance, and the public views them as different. Other times, only R&D and pro-player view the mechanic as being different.

Wotc_Bill: For instance, we're developing the October 2000 set now. There are new game mechanics and some older mechanics that the public and we have liked. We introduce these mechanics with improvements.

WOTC_Mel: So, what's a typical day for you guys . . . roll in at eleven and then what? ;)

WotC-Daneen: Well, in the past week, I've been in 20 hours of meetings, finalized names and flavor text on dozens of cards, approved many pieces of art and sketches, and assigned 85 more cards for flavor text to 12 authors. All of this concerning the October 2000 set that is currently in development.

Wotc_Bill: We truly don't have "days." R&D is available for paper-pushing type work for about 6 hours a day. **Magic** game theory is discussed just about every minute the R&D folks are together. Ten or more hours a day, including weekends. I'm always thinking about **Magic**, as are the other top **Magic** designers.

WOTC_Mel: Daneen, does the design team have the final say so on all card art?

WotC-Daneen: No, there's a team made up with a rep from Bill's development team, someone from Brand, one of us from Story (continuity), and the art director. Any of them can influence the art if it would affect their aspect of the card.

Markkus: There must be a lot of pressure to keep **Magic** as good as it always was. One wrong set and it could be the end.

Wotc_Bill: **Magic** is strong. One wrong set won't kill us. We are trying to do our best, but some sets are better than others. Look at it this way—when there are 6 sets available for Standard tournament play, one of them will be the weakest. There's no way to get around that.

WotC-Daneen: And one of them will be the strongest, but each person's favorite will probably differ.

Wotc_Bill: We try to make a new **Magic** set by making different, interesting cards, not by making more powerful cards. *Mirage* (1996) is as powerful as *Mercadian Masques*, just different.

TSRO_Zugran: How many sets are there?

WotC-Daneen: I think that, counting starter level sets, we counted about thirty.

Wotc_Bill: We have 18 sets, not including versions of the basic edition.

Markkus: Bill, I like the statement "We try to make a new **Magic** set by making different, interesting cards, not by making more powerful cards." Never change that policy. Other companies have put sales before quality, and it destroyed them or is in the process of doing so.

Wotc_Bill: We won't as long as I'm here. By making the game constantly stronger, we'll gain short-term popularity. The people in R&D are players as well as developers. We want the game strong 5, 10, and 20 years from now.

WotC-Daneen: Many of the Rebels and Mercenaries in *Mercadian Masques* were functionally the same as previous cards; they just got really interesting when thrown together as "Rebels" or "Mercenaries"

Wotc_Bill: Actually most Rebels and Mercenaries have no direct non-rebel/non-merc match.

Wotc_Bill: The exciting part about Rebels and Mercenaries is that we can do what you haven't been allowed to do before. Combining the recruiting mechanic with a few older cards (that weren't played in tournaments) made those old card concepts more interesting.

Wotc_Bill: We play our new designs against our published set. We adjust our new designs until they play 50/50 with the published stuff. Before *Mirage* we were all over the place. *Alliances* was up. *Homelands* was down. We don't balance against those sets.

WotC-Daneen: Set sizes varied back then, too, didn't they?

WOTC_Mel: When you playtest, do you playtest only under tournament rules, or do you ever play Emperor's **Magic**, team play, and stuff like that?

Wotc_Bill: We playtest and balance for Standard and Extend tournament formats, sealed deck, limited draft, and casual play. We create cards specifically for multi-player **Magic**, but we don't extensively test these. We use our **Magic** experience and the test result from other formats to make multi-player **Magic** fun.

Wotc_Bill: Starting with *Mirage*, the core of Magic R&D joined the company: me, Mark Rosewater, Mike Elliott, and William Jockusch. We consider pre-*Mirage* to be the old days. *Mirage* and on has been very balanced.

Markkus: I have to agree that some older cards like Sinkhole gave unfair advantages.

Wotc_Bill: Older cards like Sinkhole are only allowed in Type 1 tournaments. I call Type 1 "The Abomination."

Markkus: Why?

Wotc_Bill: Everything played is so powerful. Many decks can kill their opponent on the first turn. What fun is that?

Wotc_Bill: Most (95+%) of tournaments are Sealed Deck, Standard, or Extended format.

WotC-Daneen: Sealed is my favorite environment.

WOTC_Mel: I second that emotion, Daneen

Wotc_Bill: I prefer Sealed also. You need to think fast and use all your cards and tricks, not just the powerful ones.

TSRO_Zugran: Sealed? As in you take a deck and just go with the flow?

Markkus: I don't know [about Sealed Deck], too much left to chance.

WotC-Daneen: It forces you to look at some cards in combination that you might not have put together otherwise.

Wotc_Bill: When I gunsling at conventions, I play with some decks that I could buy for less than \$25. I win over half of my games. It makes some players mad to see their expensive decks beaten.

TSRO_Zugran: Bill isn't that the most rewarding part of a tournament though?

Wotc_Bill: The most rewarding part about playing is winning from a situation that others player would lose. Making plays that others couldn't see. I like it when my opponent says "I never thought of that. I need to try it sometime."

WOTC_Mel: What is your favorite part of producing a new set? The actual opening of the sealed decks for the first time?

WotC-Daneen: For me, seeing the art. The artists do some amazing things with the barest of art descriptions.

Wotc_Bill: Oddly enough, yes. We use pictureless versions of the cards for playtest. Usually with playtest names. The first time we get to play with the real stuff is at the pre-release.

Markkus: I love the ones done by Diterlizzi

WOTC_Mel: I like anything with Beebles.

Wotc_Bill: Diterlizzi is excellent. Credit Suzanne Harkey, a former art director, with that brilliant acquisition.

Wotc_Bill: Do you like Beebles?

WOTC_Mel: As a matter of fact, I do, although there's no doubt that they annoy some folks. But I am a fan of humor on the cards—big hulkin' creatures just don't do much for me.

Wotc_Bill: Players like Beebles. We try to include a Beeble in most sets.

WOTC_Mel: I also like the yellow stuffy doll from The Rack and other early cards, but then, I am definitely not the core market.

Markkus: Do you guys get along with the **Pokémon** crowd?

Wotc_Bill: Yes. We love the **Pokémon** crowd.

WOTC_Mel: I am waiting for a very vicious Pikachu to make it into a **Magic** set down the line

WotC-Daneen: That would take more hoops than I'd ever want to jump through.

Wotc_Bill: My opinion is that when you start to play TCGs that you'll eventually wind up playing **Magic**. It's the best.

TSRO_Durst: Agreed. I've only played **Magic** for a few months, but it's quite good.

Wotc_Bill: Don't get me wrong—**Pokémon** is also a great game. **Pokémon** is for a younger audience. When they grow up, they'll be looking for something more. That's where **Magic** comes in.

Wotc_Bill: Our plan is simple. Make **Magic** a great game and a great play experience. And keep it great for as long as possible.

WotC-Daneen: And we play the game too.

Wotc_Bill: Most of us play quite often.

WotC-Daneen: I just wish I had more time at work to play . . .

Wotc_Bill: I'd tell you about my current favorite deck, but most of those cards haven't been printed. It's called a "Barry" deck . . .

Wotc_Bill: Any last questions? I need to get some dinner.

TSRO_Zugran: Thanks for chatting with the few of us here.

Wotc_Bill: It's been fun.

WOTC_Mel: Thank you Bill and Daneen!

Wotc_Bill: Thanks. Bye.

WotC-Daneen: G'night.