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Making Magic Monday, January 21, 2002

Finding a Good Mechanic



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Key ideas behind keywords

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Welcome to Madness Week here on MagictheGathering.com. All week long we'll be talking about *Torment's* other new mechanic: (the first being nightmares – don't tell me you forgot Nightmare Week already?) madness. Madness is a mechanic that allows a spell to be played when it is discarded. Unlike past cards like *Dodecapod*, madness works regardless of what causes the discard, even an effect you control. Also, the madness cost – the cost to play the spell when discarded – is not always the same as the mana cost, but often lower. That allows you to do fun things like pump up your *Wild Mongrel* while also making your spell cheaper to play.

Cool, huh? Now here's the challenging part for me, your columnist of the day. Normally, I would spend my column talking about how madness was designed. But we have a feature by the mechanic's creator, Mike Elliott, explaining exactly that. Perhaps I have a card to preview and I could explain how that card in particular was designed. Nope. No such luck. (Although Mike does show off a madness card in his [feature article](#).)

So what is a designer/columnist to do? I've decided that it might be interesting to talk about how mechanics in general are designed. What follows might give you all some insight into the thought processes that went into creating madness.

DESIGN UP AHEAD

One of the points we keep trying to drum home here on MagictheGathering.com is the difference between design and development. When we continue to tune our microscope on design, we discover that it, too, breaks into multiple parts: designing individual cards, designing mechanics, designing sets, designing blocks, etc. Today, we are focusing on the second part.



Although not keyworded, these cards all use mechanics

Why don't I start by explaining what exactly a mechanic is. A mechanic is a card ability that can be used on multiple cards. That's it. It's that simple. Wait a minute, many of you are asking, don't mechanics have to have names? That is a common misconception about mechanics. Some mechanics are given a name, what we in R&D call a "keyword." Keyworded mechanics include most of the major mechanics of past blocks (flashback, threshold, kicker, cycling, echo, buyback, phasing, etc.).

Many players think the word "mechanic" refers only to keyworded mechanics. For instance, when *Mercadian Masques* first came out, I was often asked why there were no new mechanics in the set. I was very confused. *Mercadian Masques* had rebels, spellshapers, and brought back cards with alternate casting costs. But because none of the mechanics were keyworded, many players didn't count them as mechanics. That is simply a mistake. A rose by any other name – or simply no name – still smells as sweet. (How many of you expected a Shakespearean reference in an article on **Magic** mechanics?)

So why don't all mechanics have keywords? Because most mechanics don't need a keyword. If the mechanic can be clearly explained in the rules text, there's no need for the complexity of teaching people a new term. Keywords are primarily used for two reasons. First, some mechanics, like protection, need a keyword as the text required to spell out exactly what the mechanic does would take up

too much room. The second reason we use a keyword is if the mechanic encompasses enough cards, like cycling, that we want to define it just so we can make other cards that reference the mechanic. For example, that reasoning allows us to make a card like **Fluctuator** which refers to cycling without having it itself. There is actually also a secret third reason. Mechanics with keywords just seem cooler. *Mercadian Masques* taught R&D (yes, we do in fact learn from past mistakes and change our behavior) that the public likes having keyworded mechanics, so we now make sure to include at least one, most often two, in every large set. We occasionally do an additional keyworded mechanic in one of the two small sets.

MASS PRODUCTION

Of the current **Magic** designers, the most prolific are Mike Elliott and myself. We have both worked for the company for over five years and have each designed cards for every set since *Mirage*. (My first cards were actually in *Alliances* as I started a few months before Mike: **Gustha's Scepter**, **Library of Lat-Nam**, and **Soldier of Fortune** for those trivia buffs out there.) The reason I bring this up is that Mike and I each design mechanics in very different ways and I thought it might be neat to show you the different styles of different designers.

Mike is very mechanics-conscious. In fact, I think he's happiest when he's designing mechanics. He gets a great thrill out of mapping out a mechanic and then carefully expanding it to as many cards as possible. Mike devotes a lot of his design time to creating new mechanics. He has a file after file of different mechanics ideas stored away on his hard drive. As a result of this, Mike has generated more published **Magic** mechanics (everything from shadow and echo to rebels and madness) than anyone save Richard Garfield. And at the rate Mike creates mechanics, it's just a matter of time before he passes even Richard.

I, on the other hand, tend to think much smaller. I just like making cool individual cards. While I've gotten better in recent years at thinking more broadly, I tend to be at my best when I'm just creating card-by-card. So how do I create mechanics? Most often I stumble upon them; I'll create a very cool card and then it will dawn on me that the card has an expandable mechanic. A good example is **Kindle** from *Tempest*. **Kindle** (reprinted as *Odyssey's Flame Burst*) was my attempt to make a "Plague Rat - Lightning Bolt." What I mean by that was I wanted to make a direct damage spell that grew in power as you got more of them, much like **Plague Rat**. Once I solved the problem of how to do this, I soon realized that I had created a cool mechanic (cards whose effects grew as more copies of the card appeared in the graveyard). To be honest, at the time, it never dawned on me to expand the mechanic in *Tempest*. I thought it was cool as an individual card and knew we'd come back to the mechanic later. (Which of course we did in *Nemesis* with **Accumulated Knowledge** and in *Odyssey* with the **burst cycle**.)



Mechanics can come from many different places. Richard Garfield, for example, got the idea for **buyback cards** from the Super Flare cards in the game Cosmic Encounter. *Kindle* debuted a mechanic that was used again in future expansions

Cantrips (created by the *Ice Age* design team of Jim Lin, Skaff Elias, Dave Petty, and Chris Page) were created as an extension of card theory (what if a spell didn't cost a card?). Mike Elliott has said that **echo** came from the idea of credit cards (you pay for the creature over time much like paying off a credit card bill). And I came up with **flashback** watching a Feature Match at a Pro Tour (players kept checking each other's graveyards, and I thought it would be cool if they had to do that because certain cards were playable out of the graveyard). While development is very much a science, design is an art. Each designer has his own style.

THE ANSWERS, PLEASE

If there is any one common bond to designing mechanics, it is this: The designer has to be able answer several key questions.

The first question is pretty straight-forward: Is this a fun mechanic? Or: Will people enjoy playing it? That question is a lot harder than it might seem and most often requires some playtesting.

The next question is: How many cards can this mechanic support? Answering this question requires a designer to look past a single card to see the mechanic's potential. What could be done

with it? Is it a few random cards? A cycle of cards? Ten cards in a small set? Twenty cards in a large set? Fifty cards over the course of a block? How many cards are we talking about?



If the mechanic can support over twenty cards, we then ask the next question. How much ability will we have to tweak the mechanic? One of the necessities of a block mechanic is that it has to have room to grow it over the course of the block. As an example, buyback started in *Tempest* with colorless mana costs. It was tweaked in *Stronghold* with life costs. And then it was broken wide open in *Exodus* with numerous other costs (such as *Forbid*'s discard cost).

The last question a designer has to figure is what impact will the mechanic have on the environment of the set it goes into? Threshold, as an example, encourages players to aggressively get cards into their graveyard. That means cards that use sacrifices or require discards will be more powerful than normal. In addition, cards that speed you through your deck (like cantrips) are also more valuable. The mechanics will define the environment. That is why designers always start designing a set by figuring out the key mechanics (but more of that in a future column).

Buyback was a powerful - and well-explored - mechanic

As you can see a lot of thought goes into creating each mechanic. And remember, you guys only see the ones that work. For every mechanic that sees the light of day, five

other mechanics are banished to a dark dungeon in our database called the "Gene Pool." Hopefully, this column has given you a little insight into all the complexities required to make a mechanic.

Join me next week when I further explore a question I answered briefly in "Ask Wizards" a few weeks ago: Why does R&D make bad cards?

Until then, may your mana always flow freely.

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