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Split Decisions

A saga of Design/Development



Mark Rosewater

One of the Perks/Curses of being a **Magic** celebrity is that I get interviewed a lot. Now, I'm the kind of guy who likes to talk (this shouldn't come as a surprise), so I always enjoy participating in a good interview. My one pet peeve, though, is that I am asked the same questions again and again. In this column, I am planning to give the definitive answer to one of the most-asked questions I receive: "What's your favorite mechanic that you've created?"

Of all the mechanics I've created, my favorite is the "split cards" from the *Invasion* block. They embody all the elements I value most as a designer. They're cool, they're elegant, they're original, and they play well. And they have a very interesting back story. Perhaps one day I'll dedicate a column to it. It really is quite interesting. What? You want to hear it now? Well, I guess if you've got some time to spare... (Imagine wavy lines appearing on your screen.)

Let's Start at the Very Beginning

Our story begins in a meeting room here at Wizards of the Coast known as the "War Room." I had invited numerous artists and production people to a meeting because I was interested in what visual areas we had to play with in *Unglued*. The entire set was about breaking the rules, so I figured the look of the cards was fair game. At one point, Dan Gelon, a **Magic** artist who works as a graphic designer at Wizards and who was in charge of the physical design of *Unglued*, said that we would be able to overlap art on multiple cards as we could print them side by side on the card sheet. This opened up a world of possibilities.

Of all the ideas that rushed to my head, the most exciting one was the idea of making a giant card. A card so big that it required two physical cards to create it. Before the meeting was over, I realized that this card should be a creature. Thus was born B.F.M. (*left side/right side*). At 99/99, it's the largest creature we've ever printed (by a rather healthy margin, I might add).



A use for Cabal Ritual!

and we were just about to begin laying out the cards when I was called to an event I will just refer to as "The Meeting." When you enter a meeting and the person who called it won't make eye contact with you, you know bad things are about to happen. Anyway, the result of "The Meeting" was that *Unglued II* was put on hiatus.

Not surprisingly, B.F.M. proved to be one of the most popular card(s) from *Unglued*. So when I was designing *Unglued II: The Obligatory Sequel*, I looked to B.F.M. for inspiration. If the players liked one card that took up two cards, perhaps they would like two cards that took up one card. After playing around with the idea, I realized that the mini-cards looked best if the whole card was turned sideways, which allowed two smaller cards of the right proportions to be created.

I ended up designing a cycle of split cards (5 cards, each allied color combination). The art had come in

I'm often asked (usually by *Unglued* fans), "What does 'on hiatus' actually mean?" I wish I could give you a definitive answer, but there isn't one to give. The best answer I can give you is the one my Magic 8 Ball gave me when I asked it the same question. "Reply hazy. Ask again later." Will *Unglued II* ever see the light of day? I'm an eternal optimist, so I believe yes. When? Please refer back to my 8 Ball.

It's Not Dead Yet

One of my favorite screenwriting teachers used to sum up all movie plots as follows: "Introduce your main character. Throw your main character down a well. Throw rocks at him. Get him out of the well." Well, the split cards were down the well and were simply waiting for the pelting to begin. It was a wacky mechanic and the only set that would even consider using it had just been stuck in expansion purgatory. Things were looking bleak.

Then came *Invasion*. We had known for several years that the *Invasion* block was going to center around a multi-color environment. I saw an opportunity. And luckily, I was on the design team, along with Bill Rose and Mike Elliott. The core of the design was done during a week offsite in the middle of winter spent at my father's house in Tahoe. R&D likes to do design out of the office as there are fewer distractions and the atmosphere is more conducive for creativity. Plus, you can take the occasional day off to go skiing. It's a rough job, but someone's has to do it.

Sometime during that week, I approached Bill with my "crazy" idea. We were looking for multi-color ideas and the split cards were without a home. Maybe they could go in *Invasion*. Bill got a mischievous look in his eye. I knew that look; the rope had just been lowered down the well.

Not So Fast

Then came the first rock. Mike Elliott didn't like the mechanic. It was too different. It was fine for something like *Unglued*, but it was a bit too radical for a "real" set. In Mike's defense, I want to remind you all that it's easy to judge things in hindsight, and I have a long track record of strange ideas. For example, during early *Tempest* design I came up with a mechanic called "triggering" where spells had an effect when drawn. In order to make this mechanic work, I suggested that triggered cards have different colored backs so everyone knew when a triggered card was drawn. Radical ideas are not good simply because they're radical. So Mike's reaction was perfectly understandable. But our design group had three people and two of us wanted to include them so Mike was simply outvoted.

Flash forward to several months later when design handed off the file to development. Knowledge of the split cards had drifted to several sections of the company; now the real pelting would begin. On one side we had the people in favor of the split cards:

Me
Bill Rose
Richard Garfield

On the other side were those not in favor:

Everyone else

By everyone else I'm talking about all of R&D, all of the **Magic** brand team... well, everyone that wasn't me, Bill, or Richard. Suffice to say it was a lot of people.

One of the misconceptions I think players have about R&D is that we function as a single unit. (In fact, a long-running joke at Wizards is that R&D is really a giant brain called "Gleemax.") While R&D has a unified goal, it is very much a bunch of individuals, and we enjoy arguing with one another. So, no matter what the issue, R&D will have people representing all sides of the argument. The only difference between split cards and any other mechanics was that more people shared the same opinion than normal.

But Bill and I are both pretty stubborn guys, and neither one of us was going to give up without a fight.



Inch by Inch

So we came up with a plan: Divide and conquer. I was on the development team, so it was my job to sway them over to our side. Bill, meanwhile, was busy convincing everyone else.

The development team for *Invasion* was Henry Stern, William Jockusch, Robert Gutschera and myself (Randy Buehler would join the team months later when he began working at Wizards). In the first five minutes of the first meeting, Henry, the lead developer, said, "Can we just kill off these split cards now?"

You know how in many movies there comes the key moment where everything is going wrong and it's up to the main character to give a moving speech to turn it all around? That was my moment. Luckily, I had my speech prepared. The success of **Magic**, I said, was about innovation. Richard Garfield had made numerous choices when the game was first created. But the heart of the game, I explained, wasn't about any one of those choices. It was about the proliferation of choices.

Magic is a living, breathing game. The only way to kill it, I argued, wasn't for R&D to make the wrong decisions, but to keep making the same decisions. The evolution of the game is essential to its survival, which meant that every once in a while it was crucial to do something that the audience didn't expect. On occasion, we had to throw the players for a loop by doing something they simply couldn't anticipate. Maybe split cards were this thing and maybe they weren't, but we had to at least give them a chance. We should kill them for not being fun or not playing well. We shouldn't kill them simply for being different.

The team voted unanimously to keep the cards in for further playtesting.

But They're So Cute

And as we played with them, the team slowly came around... on the card mechanic, at least. The majority of the team still had issues with the suggested layout (the two mini-cards side by side). Early on, I had separated the layout issue from the mechanic issue. If the team liked the cards, I argued, we had numerous options on how to lay them out. For example, we could print them as gold cards with two different mana costs.

While all this was going on, Bill had been working hard to find us some allies. His biggest early success was that he managed to sway Joel Mick, then the brand manager of **Magic**, to our side. Little by little, the tide was turning.

The key to winning the layout issue was to approach the problem from the other side. As R&D had warmed up to the mechanic, I asked them to consider what the best layout would be. If we could do anything, what would best serve the split cards? After considering many options, it became obvious that the mini-card approach had numerous advantages. First, it visually explained the concept better than any other option (The card is this effect or that effect.). Second, it solved an illustration issue (How do you show a spell that does one of two things?) by allowing each effect to get its own picture. And third, it had what we in R&D call "splash value." It made you open eyes extra wide the first time you saw it.

I remember sitting down with Bill the day the file left development. The split cards were still in it and they had been layed out exactly as we had imagined a year earlier. I turned to him, let out a sigh, and said, "We did it."

I saw the same mischievous stare in his eye I had seen when I first pitched the idea. He smiled as he said, "I was never worried."

What the -- ?!!

One of the great joys of being in R&D is watching the newsgroups as rumors of the new sets spread like wildfire. I was particularly eager to see initial reactions to the split cards. Then one day I turned to a popular rumor page to see that an *Invasion* card sheet was being auctioned on eBay weeks before the prerelease. To make matters worse, the auction had a picture of the sheet that included a split card (*Spite/Malice*).

R&D had a great chuckle as numerous people fought for days explaining what the split card actually was. In one long thread of 180 posts, only one person thought the card might be exactly what it looked like. My favorite assumption was that this was an early test sheet and that the split card represented the two choices that R&D had yet to decided between.

All's Well That Ends Well

In the end, the split cards got out of the well and even got a little parade in their honor. All in all, a happy ending.

My real point for telling this story is that I think it shows off one of the best qualities of R&D. It's easy to support something you believe in. In some ways, Bill and I had the simplest jobs. Split cards were my baby. It's not hard to go to the mat for your baby. But the rest of R&D began with a mechanic they didn't like. Their gut instinct was get rid of it. Eventually they realized that a few of us had passion for the idea so they kept it around. Split cards exist not because Bill and I believed in it, but because the rest of R&D were willing to trust us and give it a shot.

That's all for this column. Join me next week when I explain how **Magic** makes enemies.

Until then, may you have the **Giant Growth** in your hand when you need it.

Sincerely,


Mark Rosewater

The Split Cards

<i>Invasion</i>	<i>Apocalypse</i>
<i>Wax/Wane</i>	<i>Order/Chaos</i>
<i>Spite/Malice</i>	<i>Illusion/Reality</i>
<i>Assault/Battery</i>	<i>Night/Day</i>
<i>Stand/Deliver</i>	<i>Fire/Ice</i>
<i>Pain/Suffering</i>	<i>Life/Death</i>



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