



## Making Magic

Monday, June 10, 2002

# Common Courtesy

## Designing the foundations



Mark Rosewater

Welcome to Commons Week. This week we'll be talking about the meat and potatoes of **Magic**: the common. I guess I'll begin by letting you in on a little secret about commons that only the designers know. They're really, really hard to design. In fact, they are the hardest type of card to design. Why? Because they're the most important cards of the set and they have the largest number of restrictions.

## Plain and Simple

What makes commons so important? Several things:

**Set Exposure:** When a player opens a booster pack, they get one rare, three uncommons, and eleven commons. That means 73% of all cards a player owns are common. This is the key to the strength of commons. The average player doesn't see all the uncommons and sees even fewer of the rares. But they see the commons. The commons define the set.

**Basic Utility:** Because utility cards (cards that do the most basic functions -- destroy a creature, fetch a land, counter a spell, etc.) are crucial to deck design, R&D puts the most basic types of these cards at common. This insures that all players have access to them. Related to this point is that R&D always makes the power level of commons high enough to ensure that casual players have access to constructed-quality cards.

**Role in Limited:** This 73% is even more important in limited as players don't have the luxury of choosing what cards to play with. As such, commons are the backbone of limited. When pro players analyze expansions, notice that they always emphasize the commons in each colors. They do this because they understand that the commons are the only cards that can be consistently relied upon. R&D has to be very conscious of this because any theme that works its way into limited (less creature removal, more fliers, higher mana costs, etc.) will ripple throughout the limited game.

A good way to think of the role of commons, uncommons and rares is with a metaphor. (And regular readers of "Making Magic" should know I'm a sucker for a metaphor.) Imagine **Magic** as an ice cream sundae. The rares are the toppings: nuts, sprinkles, cherry, chopped-up Snickers, etc. These are the exciting parts. These are the ones that draw your attention when ordering. The uncommons are the sauces: chocolate, butterscotch, hot fudge, etc.. These provide much of the substantive flavor. The commons are the ice cream. It's not the part that grabs your focus, but just imagine a sundae without it.

## Common Knowledge

Now that I've talked about why commons are so important, I need to explain why commons have so many restrictions in design.



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The best commons are useful, define the set, and are at a competitive power level.

**Rules Comprehension:** During my article on rare cards ("[Rare, but Well Done](#)"), I talked about an important realization R&D made about card complexity. The more serious a player is, the more cards he or she buys. Also, the better they understand the rules. This means that R&D can scale complexity by skewing the more complicated cards to rare. This way the beginning player who owns mostly commons has an overall simpler mix of cards than the experienced player who owns many, if not all, of the rares. What this means for design is that common cards have to be relatively simple.

**Line Length:** This category is directly tied to the last one. Not only do we want common cards to be simple, we want them to be short in rules text. Why? Because wordiness is both inelegant and intimidating. Some wordiness is necessary (to communicate an intricate card power, for instance) but in general it makes the cards appear clunky and complex. By pushing these types of cards toward rare, we make the overall game seem more elegant. In addition, less text is not as scary to newer players. Our testing with beginners, for example, showed that cards with too many lines of text were simply skipped over. Since R&D already encourages simplicity in design (for more on this see "[Keeping It Simple](#)"), this goal fits well with our overall big picture.

**Not Out of Flavor:** Because commons define the environment, R&D is careful to keep exceptions to color philosophy (what we in R&D call bleeds) restricted to the rarer end of the spectrum. The reason for this is simple. Bleeds should be special. If they were common, they wouldn't be.

**Must Appear Often:** Because common cards show up in such great number, we don't like to put effects on common cards that don't seem common (I'm using the normal English definition here.). One example of this is cards with big effects. *Wrath of God* is simple to understand, but it doesn't seem like the kind of spells that a mage would see all that often. As such, we don't put big effects on common cards. Another example would be legends. (And before people write in to me, yes I know *Homelands* had common legends.) Legends are too iconic to show every fourth or fifth pack.



*These cards were probably not good to print as commons: Pestilence was too devastating in limited, Chandler is a legend, and Dead Ringers confuses too many players.*

constantly mined. The simple ideas are slowly being used up.

To give you a sense of how this plays out, I'm going to give all of you an inside look at design. Imagine you're designing red commons for the next large set. In an average large expansion, red has about twenty-one cards. Of those twenty-one cards, around nine are creatures and twelve are spells. (Red, like blue, has more spells than creatures at common.) Let's assume we already have the creatures. In general, creatures are easier to design than spells. So we have to make twelve common red spells. To demonstrate my point I'm going to let everything swing our way. You're about to see the best case scenario. For example, I'll allow us to have two repeats. (*Odyssey*, for example, only had one common spell repeat -- *Kindle* repeated as *Flame Burst*) Ready to start designing?

**Not Too Swingy in Limited:** Another concern about commons is their effect on limited. Because they show up so often, R&D has to be careful to avoid printing common cards that will dominate the limited environment. A good example of a past mistake would be the *Urza's Saga* reprinting of *Pestilence*. *Pestilence* was one of the major cards responsible for the complete dominance of black in *Urza's Saga* limited.

## Ah, The Rub

The above list seems a bit restrictive, but not too badly so. What's the problem? Why are commons so hard to design? Because there's one final rule that applies to all design that makes everything a whole lot harder. That rule: The vast majority of cards have to be new.

In the beginning, common card ideas were plentiful. Destroy target land -- that's good. Enchanted creature gets +2/+1 -- nice. A 2/2 for -- solid. But with time, this resource is being

## Seeing Red

To start we want to have some direct damage. That's red's thing. How many should we have? Three? Four? Five? Five is about the most we can get away with, so let's try five. (*Odyssey* actually had six, but one of the mini themes of the *Odyssey* block is that we pushed red's direct damage a little above normal levels.) To keep the cards from seeming repetitive, we need to come up with a variety of different direct damage effects. For example, we wouldn't want to put **Shock** and **Firebolt** in the same set. Okay, let's begin with the easy one. The large set's going to have some new spell mechanic. So, let's make an instant that deals 2 damage to target creature or player that ties into it.



For our second spell let's assume that there's another new mechanic that can also be tied to a direct damage spell. To separate it from our first spell, we'll make it a sorcery and have it deal more damage. Let's say four damage and it can also hit creatures or players. Two direct damage spells that target creatures and players is enough. Next we can make a direct damage spell that only targets creatures. It needs to be straight-forward but have some new twist that ties into the overall theme of the block. Fine, we can do that. Let's assume it's an instant and that it deals three damage to separate it from the other two spells. Maybe our fourth spell will also hit only creatures. We could make it a cheap sorcery that deals 1 damage. It also needs some new twist. What the hell, we can do that.

Finally, we can do a direct damage spell that only hits players. We'll make it a sorcery and have it deal five damage. The reason I'm not going above five is that a six point direct damage spell doesn't really feel common. It's starting to be a pretty large effect. The problem with a sorcery that deals five to a player is that we've already done it. The spell was called **Lava Axe** (pro players used to say, "Can I Axe you a question?" before playing it) and has appeared in *Portal*, *Portal Second Age*, and *Urza's Legacy*. Creating a new spell that's going to feel different enough seems like a real challenge so I'm just going to call **Lava Axe** one of our repeats.

All right, we have seven cards left. Let's starting thinking about basic red abilities. Land destruction. That's good for a spell. We'll find some way to blend **Stone Rain** with one of the new mechanics. Artifact destruction. That's also good for a spell. We'll find a new tweak for **Shatter**. Okay, five cards remaining.

We dig a little deeper. How about a **Panic** (target creature cannot block) variant? Four to go. A creature enchantment that boosts power and maybe grants first strike or haste. Three to go. As you can see, this gets harder and harder.

Okay, how about an instant that grants either first strike or haste, whichever one we don't use on the creature enchantment? We'll have to add something else since neither spell is worth a single red mana if it only grants the one ability. Notice our card quality is starting to drop. We have two cards remaining. Let's assume we search old sets and find some quirky common and use it as our second repeat. All this and we still have one card to go. This, my faithful readers, is the hazard of designing commons.

Notice that once you assign each slot to a general mechanic, you still need to make the card. Most of these will be tweaks (for more on this see "[Tweak in Review](#)" -- wow, this column is becoming a greatest hits compilation). And the problem merely gets worse with each set because every tweak we do just makes one less answer we could use in the next expansion.

## But Wait, There's More

Now, here's the best part. Designing commons is an incredibly hard task that keeps getting harder and harder. And I love doing it. Designing **Magic** to me is a giant puzzle that constantly requires us to keep rethinking how we solve it. The solution that worked yesterday won't work tomorrow. This keeps us all on our feet. I like to think of this as how I play **Magic**. Yeah, it's a slightly different game but no less of a challenge and no less fun. Anyway, I hope this column demonstrated how some of the pitfalls of design are not always where they seem.

Join me next week when I delve into my "mailbag".


Until then, may your common trump his rare.

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