



Making Magic

Monday, July 1, 2002

No Two See the Same Game

MaRo responds to another reader



Mark Rosewater



My mailbag column ("[I've Got Mail](#)") from two weeks ago appeared to hit a nerve, so expect more like it in the future. As a result of my column, I was deluged with an even greater amount of mail. This week, I wanted to address in length several issues raised by a letter sent by John Knadler. (And yes, John did have a letter in my mailbag column. He's one of my more prolific mail writers.) To start, here's John's letter:

I have to say that the choices in the current [*Eighth Edition*] poll are at best unexciting and at worse pathetic. I think it is obvious that people were going to choose the **Two-Headed Dragon** and **Nekrataal** over the other choices because both have cheaper casting costs. Personally, I am happy to see **Dark Hatchling** go because of the overabundance of over-costed creatures. At the very least, I hope the other votes can help us (the public) get rid of more over-costed creatures.

Also, the art choices confirm R&D's short-sighted commitment to over-costed never-played creatures. Come on -- **Thorn Elemental** and **Angel of Mercy**? No one plays with them and no one will (unless they are playing an **Oath of Druids** or **Survival/Recur** deck). I can see a beginner playing a **Thorn Elemental**. I can never see a beginner playing an **Angel of Mercy** because (1) white is terrible and will continue to be terrible (because R&D hates white and loves to saddle it with crappy abilities like life gain and damage prevention as opposed to reasonably-costed protection and damage redirection and first strike and evasion and so on and so on) and (2) there are other, better creatures for five mana (including **Serra Angel**). Honestly, when was the last time you saw anyone (beginner or otherwise) play a creature for five mana with a crappy ability like **Angel of Mercy**? If I wanted life gain from a creature, I would play **Venerable Monk** or **Teroh's Faithful**. The only positive is that **Angel of Mercy** is bigger than a griffin costing four mana and it does more than a griffin for the extra mana (I have previously written to you that griffins should only cost three).

Anyway, I also wanted to mention that *Portal* and *Starter* were financial failures because they had terrible cards and beginners soon discovered that it was better to move to the expansions. As a result, they soon stopped buying the "beginner sets" and started buying the advanced and expert sets. Likewise, *Eighth Edition* will be filled with terrible cards and everyone will buy the expansions. Thus, *Eighth Edition*, rather than increasing the sale of **Magic**, will result in a significant decrease in the sale of **Magic**. I notice that **Magic's** sales aren't posted publicly, but I am sure that sales have declined. From my own experience: When *Mercadian Masques* came out, it was hard to get a box for under \$70 (including shipping). Now it is easy to get a box of *Odyssey* for between \$60 and \$65 (including shipping). I would say that that shows a definite decline in demand between *Masques* and *Odyssey*. I also notice that boxes of *Tempest* and *Urza's Saga* still go for over a \$100 (even though other expansions go for much less -- *Nemesis* and *Prophecy* go for around \$40-\$55). I think that shows that people want exciting sets which have banned cards because those sets push the envelope while "balanced" sets bore people to death. I live in San Francisco, a major city, and I have to drive to another city to play **Magic**. Why is that? Because all of the stores selling **Magic** and sponsoring tournaments have closed down because of lack of demand. This should be a message that you need to



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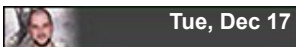
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rethink your card policy. People want excitement, not boring cards. Mr. Rosewater hinted at an exciting 10th anniversary. Well, *Eighth Edition* ain't it.

John Knadler
Hoping that **Magic** gets better

My response:

John,

First, I want to say that you obviously care very much about **Magic** and I'm glad that you use your passion constructively to try and improve the game. That said, I'm concerned that you're making some false assumptions. To make this easier to follow, I'll be reprinting sections of your letter and then responding.

Ch- Ch- Choices

First, you're very critical of "[Selecting Eighth Edition](#)", our *Eighth Edition* promotion where we are letting you the public make card and art decisions. (As well as the opportunity to write flavor text, which will start this week.)

*"I have to say that the choices in the current poll are at best unexciting and at worse pathetic. I think it is obvious that people were going to choose the **Two-Headed Dragon** and **Nekrataal** over the other choices because both have cheaper casting costs. Personally, I am happy to see **Dark Hatchling** go because of the over abundance of over-costed creatures. At the very least, I hope the other votes can help us (the public) get rid of more over-costed creatures."*

I think you misunderstand how the promotion came to be. For each basic set, R&D has one person start by making their version of the next edition. We like to think of it as an equivalent of a designer for an expansion, although there are many obvious differences. For *Eighth Edition*, that person was Randy Buehler. Once he was done, he handed the file to an R&D development team that will take several months to flesh out the set. This includes playtesting the cards and having various discussions about different concerns (among them: power level, flavor of the colors, appropriateness for new players, etc.) For those interested, the *Eighth Edition* development team is Randy, Robert Gutschera, William Jockusch (and yes, he really exists despite comments to the contrary), and myself.

During the "design" portion of *Eighth Edition*, Randy was unsure of what cards to include in certain slots. When this happened, he included all the possible choices. The plan was for the development team to make the appropriate decisions. But then Randy had a cool idea. (You see, Aaron and I keep stressing to the R&D guys that we want MagicTheGathering.com to be as interactive as possible.) Rather than leave these decisions to the development team, why not let all of you decide?

So the choices were not picked to maximize their coolness. They are the actual decisions the development team would have made if we didn't turn this into a promotion for the players. And yes, some of these decisions will be more interesting than others. (Some more interesting ones are definitely on their way.) But you need to remember that the promotion is not only about letting you have a voice; it's also an opportunity to demonstrate to all of you what kind of decisions we make in R&D.

Diff'rent Strokes

Next, we come to your dislike of the "over-costed" large creatures:

*"Also, the art choices confirm R&D's short-sighted commitment to over-costed never-played creatures. Come on -- **Thorn Elemental** and **Angel of Mercy**? No one plays with them and no one will (unless they are playing an **Oath of Druids** or **Survival/Recur** deck). I can see a beginner playing a **Thorn Elemental**. I can never see a beginner playing an **Angel of Mercy** because (1)*





*white is terrible and will continue to be terrible (because R&D hates white and loves to saddle it with crappy abilities like life gain and damage prevention as opposed to reasonably-costed protection and damage redirection and first strike and evasion and so on and so on) and (2) there are other, better creatures for five mana (including **Serra Angel**). Honestly, when was the last time you saw anyone (beginner or otherwise) play a creature for five mana with a crappy ability like **Angel of Mercy**?"*

This complaint is a much more complex issue. To be blunt, I think you're missing the forest for the trees. What makes **Magic** such a special game is that it's customizable. Unlike

almost all other games out there, **Magic** allows you, the player, to pick and choose what kind of game it is. In essence, **Magic** lets all of you be your own game designers. So what's the problem?

In Ray Bradbury's short story "The Martian" from his book *The Martian Chronicles*, there is a character named Tom. Tom's big secret is that he's not actually Tom, as Tom died of pneumonia as a boy. Tom is actually a Martian who appears to Tom's parents as Tom. The problem is that the Martian appears to other humans as the loved one they've lost. Essentially, the Martian's identity is unique to each person. They see in him what they want to see. **Magic** is our Martian.

Each player views the game through his own distorted lens. Because to him, that's what **Magic** is about. The problem is that players have a hard time seeing the game through other player's eyes. So, John, when you open a **Thorn Elemental** or an **Angel of Mercy**, you get angry because to you they represent useless cards. But, that's simply your game of **Magic**. To other players, these cards are exciting. To other players, these cards define what **Magic** is to them.

Many players have a hard time accepting that **Magic** might be a completely different game to other players. As an example, I got numerous responses that simply didn't believe the *Invasion* godbook study I reported on in my [last column](#) (the one that had **Heroes' Reunion** come in second). Meanwhile, I got letters from other players that were overjoyed that R&D knew their type existed.

The trickiest thing is this: R&D has to design not to any one player's view of the game but to all players' views. The only way to accomplish this is to design different cards for different players. That means that for each player there are "dead" cards (defined as a cards that they will never play) in every expansion. This is a necessary evil. If we design the game to just one segment's view, the game's audience will shrink to the point that it would most likely kill the game financially.

I'm asking for you to be tolerant of your "dead" cards just as I ask a casual player to ignore his "dead" cards, you know, the ones you play with. Trust me, in the end, their existence does far more good for you than bad.

It's Not Dead Yet

Finally, we come to your concern for the game's future:

*"Anyway, I also wanted to mention that Portal and Starter were financial failures because they had terrible cards and beginners soon discovered that it was better to move to the expansions. As a result, they soon stopped buying the 'beginner sets' and started buying the advanced and expert sets. Likewise, Eighth Edition will be filled with terrible cards and everyone will buy the expansions. Thus, Eighth Edition, rather than increasing the sale of **Magic**, will result in a significant decrease in the sale of **Magic**. I notice that **Magic**'s sales aren't posted publicly, but I am sure that sales have declined. From my own experience: When Mercadian Masques came out, it was hard to get a box for under \$70 (including shipping). Now it is easy to get a box of Odyssey for between \$60 and \$65 (including shipping). I would say that that shows a definite decline in demand between Masques and Odyssey. I also notice that boxes of Tempest and Urza's Saga still go for over a \$100 (even though other expansions go for much less -- Nemesis and Prophecy go for around \$40-\$55). I think that shows that people want exciting sets which have banned cards because those sets push the envelope while 'balanced' sets bore people to death. I live in San Francisco, a major city, and I have to drive to another city to play **Magic**. Why is that? Because all of the stores selling **Magic** and sponsoring tournaments have closed down*

because of lack of demand. This should be a message that you need to rethink your card policy. People want excitement, not boring cards. Mr. Rosewater hinted at an exciting 10th anniversary. Well, Eighth Edition ain't it."

To quote Mark Twain: "Rumors of my recent death are greatly exaggerated."

Predicting the death knell of the game is almost as old as the game itself. And while I find cries of "Magic is about to die" to be a bit nostalgic, I feel that I need to put this rumor to sleep. **Magic** is as healthy as ever. We're not in trouble. We're not on some steep decline. We're not bailing water out of the boat. Quite the opposite actually. Our sales are good. (Even on *Seventh Edition*.) Our organized play numbers are good. In short, **Magic** is doing great. Sleep soundly; the game isn't about to disappear tomorrow.

Next, *Portal* and *Starter*. The reasons we abandoned both these products was not financial. The reason was customer feedback. Beginners were frustrated that they were segregated from the rest of the **Magic** community. When they finally showed up at a tournament with their deck, they were informed that it wasn't legal to play. To fix this problem, we wrapped the product into the basic set.

This is why **Eager Cadet** is in *Seventh* (and soon to be *Eighth*) *Edition*. But instead of getting mad about it, I recommend that you understand it for what it is: a "dead" card. This is one of the allotted cards that isn't for you, but it is vital to the person it is designed for. Now, I have read many articles and emails by people who believe we are coddling the beginners. ("I got thrown in the deep end of the pool when I was taught to swim and I didn't drown.") Our simplification efforts, they believe, are a waste of time and cardboard.

My answer to that is that I've seen something they haven't seen: market testing. You see, every once in a while we collect random people that fit **Magic's** key demographics and teach them how to play in a controlled setting. Meanwhile, I, and numerous other Wizards employees, watch the festivities behind a one-way mirror. And you know what we've learned? **Magic** is very confusing for beginners. And I'm not talking about some random housewife from Walla Walla or a six-year-old kid. These tests are with male teenagers and young twentysomethings with an interest in games. And learning **Magic** isn't easy for them.

As far as "balanced" sets boring the players to death, I will point at the *Invasion* block. The three sets (*Invasion*, *Planeshift*, and *Apocalypse*) were very well received and didn't have a single banned card. That said, I (and R&D) actually agree that we can push the envelope a little more than we are currently being a bit more aggressive in both design and development.

Finally, I believe that we will have an exciting 10th anniversary and that *Eighth Edition* will be part of the excitement.

Mo' Mentum

I want to end this column by stressing that I'm happy I receive letters like John's. **Magic** means a great deal to me and I'm glad to see others that share my passion for the game. My objective today was to try and clarify some issues that I believe were misunderstood. That is one of my ongoing goals with this column so expect to see more like it in the future.

As always, if you have some message about how you feel the game can be improved (or you want us to preserve some aspect you currently enjoy about the game), please drop me a note at makingmagic@wizards.com. I'm a bit too busy to reply to every letter but I do read everything sent to me. I like to think of this as one of the perks of MagicTheGathering.com. You have the ear of someone in the heart of the game (two if you count Randy). Use it.


Join me next week when I introduce you to the designer's favorite tool.

Until then, may the rare of your pack be designed specifically for you.

Mark Rosewater

Mark may be reached at makingmagic@wizards.com.



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