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Printer Friendly

Making Magic Monday, July 29, 2002

When Bad Things Happen to Good Cards



Birds, Elves, and base set rotations

Mark Rosewater

"Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction" -- Pablo Picasso

Several weeks ago in the "[Selecting Eighth Edition](#)" promotion, we let all of you [choose](#) between [Birds of Paradise](#) (and [Vine Trellis](#)) and [Llanowar Elves](#) (and [Utopia Tree](#)). The winners would be guaranteed slots in *Eighth Edition* while the losers would be denied. The winners were [Birds of Paradise](#) and [Vine Trellis](#).



This week, I'm going to answer the question that's on everyone's lips: Why? Why did R&D have to remove either Birds or Elves? Or more broadly, why do good, classic cards that have been in the game since its beginning have to get rotated out?

Since I only seem to broach the more complicated questions, I have multiple answers.

#1 - Avoiding Creative Glut

Creative glut? Huh? English, Rosewater, speak English. One of my hobbies is the study of creative thought. In fact, my favorite book is entitled *A Whack on the Side of the Head* by Roger von Oech. In it, von Oech makes the claim that anyone can be creative. What keeps them from doing so is what he refers to as the "ten mental locks." (For those that care, this book inspired me to write an article, one of my all-time favorites, called "The Ten Mental Locks of **Magic**" which was published in *Duelist* # 4). These mental locks are the ways people keep themselves from being creative.

The third mental lock is "Follow the Rules." The section starts out with the Picasso quote that I began this column with. von Oech explains that one of the greatest inhibitors to creative thought is a desire to follow an existing set of rules. "I can't do *that*. The rules don't allow *that*."

This problem happens to the most creative of people. Why? Harkening back to my column of a few weeks ago ("[Zen and the Art of Cycle Maintenance](#)"), people crave structure. As an example, Creative Guy comes up with a new, innovative idea. People like it. Creative Guy expands upon the idea. But the new idea isn't as innovative as the original idea since certain conventions that were popular in the first idea are included in the second. Creative Guy has drifted towards structure. Each new generation of the idea inherits more and more baggage from the earlier ideas. Eventually, Creative Guy creates an idea with little to no innovation. This degeneration is what I refer to as "creative glut."

Lets bring the idea of creative glut to **Magic**. Richard Garfield designed **Magic**, and many of the first cards are what we could refer to as "timeless." They're elegant, they have basic abilities, they're easy to understand, and they have good flavor. So, in future basic editions, the development team is encouraged to keep them around. But each year, three new sets get released and in each of them are a few new "timeless" cards. These cards get added to the basic

set. Now, one of two things is bound to happen. Either (a) we run out of space in the basic set meaning that we are unable to rotate in new cards. Or (b) some of the “timeless” cards have to occasionally be rotated out. As **Llanowar Elves** demonstrates, we’ve chosen (b).

#2 – Loosening Design Constraints

One of green’s flavors is the ability to produce mana. In particular, it has small creatures that give it a permanent mana boost. Occasionally, this mana boost allows it access to other colors. As a designer, I’m excited to explore this rich vein of design. But I can’t. Why? Because there’s no room for new design.

You see, **Llanowar Elves** and **Birds of Paradise** are at the top of the power curve. They are about as good as R&D makes cards these days. So, in order to make a tournament-quality green mana producer, I have to create a card that won’t be eclipsed by **Elves** or **Birds** yet isn’t more powerful than either. In my seven years as a **Magic** designer I think I’ve accomplished this task once (with **Werebear**).

One of the big secrets of design is how the existence of certain cards holds back countless of other ideas. **Llanowar Elves** is a great card, but by taking a breather, he will let a score of other cards finally come out to play.

#3 – Inspiring Change

Here’s another R&D truism: **Magic** is bigger than the cards. What this means is that the game as a whole is more than the sum of its parts. Take any card. Hell, take any ten cards. Use your time machine and wipe them out of this time space continuum. You know what? **Magic** will survive. I’m sure a couple of wise guys out there are going, “Yeah, what about the five basic lands?”

Fine. Take away the basic lands and whatever five other cards you think are the most important to the game. That still won’t kill it. Sure, **Magic** would be different. Perhaps the **dual lands** would still be around. Or perhaps, **painlands** would be the default. Whatever, **Magic** as a game would shrug off the change like water off a duck. Yes, losing **Llanowar Elves** will change **Magic**. But isn’t that the point? What would **Magic** be like without the **Elves**? Up until now we’ve never known. Here’s our chance.



*The game changes yet again. **Magic** has weathered the loss of “staple” cards countless times before.*

There’s another way to think about it. R&D sees **Magic** becoming a classic game that will last the test of time. In a hundred years I would like **Magic** historians to look back to a time when every card (okay, with possibly the exception of basic land) vanished from the environment. What was the game like without **Disenchant**? Or **Stone Rain**? Or **Counterspell**? Just as mechanics move in and out of **Magic** so too should individual cards.

In the end, here’s the real problem. People as a species fear change. **Magic** at its core is a game about change. Why do people enjoy participating in something that directly faces one of their greatest fears? Perhaps **Magic** is the mental equivalent of bungee jumping. The point is that if you don’t like change, **Magic** is clearly not the game for you. If you enjoy all the positives that change brings to the game, then you just have to accept that change will occasionally have its negatives.

#4 – Bring Balance to the Game

Every new basic edition, R&D tries to rotate in new, exciting cards that we expect to have an impact on the tournament scene. But here’s the problem. We don’t want to raise the power level of the basic set. If we did, we would be stealing the power from the expansions, and it’s not good for anyone if the expansions don’t have their share of powerful cards. (If the idea of a power level

confuses you, you might want to take a peak at my article on why R&D makes bad cards, "[When Cards Go Bad.](#)")

This means that for every ounce of power we bring in, an ounce has to go. For every good card that enters, a good card must leave. The good news is that **Llanowar Elves** is a very good card, so *Eighth Edition* will have a large vacuum to fill with new tournament-worthy cards.

#5 – To Return, Things Must Leave

Very early in **Magic's** history, R&D learned the value of repeats. R&D realized that it didn't need to constantly reinvent the wheel. Rather than creating a new tweak for every new set, sometimes the original would suffice. Originally, this met with great disdain from the public. "I already have card X. Why do I want to open a booster pack and get another one?"

But then something happened. Time elapsed. Now repeats weren't just recycled cards but a chance for old favorites to return to the fold. Repeats became fun. Where before the marketing department downplayed repeats, they now trumpeted the return of cards like **Erhnam Djinn**.

Experience has shown that players like seeing the return of old cards. Absence does make the heart grow fonder. But we can't return what we didn't take away. Today's pain is tomorrow's pleasure. I don't expect this reason to gather much support for **Llanowar Elves'** departure. Losing things, after all, isn't fun. But the point of my column is to be honest with all of you and this is one of the important reasons that **Elves** are being rotated out. Just remember that a rotation isn't a death sentence. **Llanowar**



The return of old favorites creates excitement.

Elves are merely taking a little vacation. I promise we haven't seen the last of the jolly ol' **Elves**.

#6 – Na Na Na Na, Na Na Na Na, Hey, Hey, Hey, Goodbye

Finally, cards sometimes go because it's their time. While this isn't really true about **Llanowar Elves** (although their combined power with **Birds** was definitely a factor) it is true of a number of past retirements. **Dark Ritual**, for example, was rotated out of *Sixth Edition* because R&D came to believe that it wasn't healthy for the game. I wouldn't be waiting up nights for its return.

Elvish Have Left the Building

I, too, have very fond memories of **Llanowar Elves**. Probably my favorite deck of all time (a blue/green weenie deck that I played at 1994 Worlds--yes, I have played in a World Championships) included four **Elves** and four **Birds**. It's sad to see the **Elves** go. I'll miss them. In fact, from strictly a design point of view, I believe **Elf** should stay. (A flying bird is a bit out of flavor for green.) But there are many other factors, and for once, it wasn't my call.

In the end, rotations are a way of life in **Magic**. Change is its lifeblood. While it saddens me to see **Elves** go away, I know they do so for a greater good. And I know that someday I will see their tattooed face again.


Goodbye, fair elf. Until we meet again.

Join me next week when I explore a *Nights* to remember.

Until then, may you savor every elf tap.

Mark Rosewater

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