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Making Magic Monday, January 27, 2003

Frames of Reference



Mark Rosewater

Mark answers your new card face questions

Today's column was going to be about something else. But as I sat down to write it, I realized that what all of you wanted was to hear me talk about the new card frames. So I will.

Let me start today's column by saying that your voices haven't been falling on deaf ears. Some of you are very upset by this change. Others are confused as to why the change is happening. Many of you have questions you want answered.

I thought I'd organize this column by answering the most common questions I've been receiving in my mail and have read on various web sites and bulletin boards. My goal today is to answer these questions and give you a better understanding of our thought processes.

Question #1: Why? Why? For Love of God, Why?!!

To answer this question I think I need to start by explaining how we see **Magic** here at Wizards of the Coast. We think of **Magic** as a classic game like Monopoly® or SCRABBLE®. We make our decisions assuming that forty years from now we'll be celebrating **Magic's** fiftieth anniversary. And fifty years after that, the hundredth. This means that we see change in a very big-picture sort of way.



The other important point I feel I need to stress is that how we see **Magic** now and in the future is not how Richard Garfield envisioned the game when he first created it. This is in no way a strike against Richard. I believe **Magic** is the greatest game ever created. No one is more responsible for that than Richard. But who could have anticipated what **Magic** would become? Richard was designing a "little game" to be played in between role-playing sessions. He expected people to spend twenty to fifty dollars on it. A rare card like **Black Lotus** or **Ancestral Recall** was balanced by the fact that at most only one would exist between the entire play group.

In short, there is a discrepancy between where **Magic** started and where we believe **Magic** should be. In order to get from A to B, at some point we need to make changes. You have to understand that this transition has been ongoing from **Magic's** start. Just as **Magic's** metagame keeps changing, so, too, has the game itself. Many aspects that players take for granted didn't exist at the game's start. Here is just a short list of a few things that have been added to (or changed in) **Magic** since the Alpha release:

- sixty-card deck limits and the four-of card limit
- banned and restricted lists
- Constructed formats (including Standard, Extended, and Block Constructed) other than Type 1
- Limited formats (including Booster Draft, Rochester Draft, and Sealed Deck)

- yearly blocks (including block mechanics)
- card rarity indicators, card numbering, and foils

The biggest change came many years ago. There are two major forces in the game of **Magic**, flavor and function. Flavor strives to make the game as rich as possible. Function strives to make the game as smooth as possible. Flavor makes things cool; function makes it fun. Flavor wraps you in the metaphor of the world. Function makes the game the best it can be.

The problem is that from time to time the two bump heads. When flavor comes in conflict with function, who should win? When the game was first created, the answer was flavor. Alpha was clearly designed to be as flavorful as possible. Often at the sake of game play. But as the game became more popular, R&D made an important realization. While flavor was important, it wasn't as important as function. The game, essentially, had to come first.

The earliest implementation of this came when Standard was first announced. Yes, it's more flavorful to let players have access to every card, but the game suffers. Next, R&D starting looking at how they did design. It's more flavorful to add an extra line on every card, but it added game complexity without much payoff. Having lots and lots of creature types was more flavorful, but it made creature types matter less in play. Designing the rules to let each card do what was individually the coolest increased flavor but at the cost of an unwieldy set of rules.

At each fork in the road, R&D has taken the path of functionality. This doesn't mean that we don't want flavor. We do. Flavor is important. But we don't push flavor at the sake of the game. So why did we change the card frames? To make them more functional. To continue the evolution of the game that has been continuing since the game's creation.

This, of course, leads us to the next question:

Question #2: What Was Wrong With The Old Frames? (aka Why Fix It If It Isn't Broken?)

There were a number of problems. Let me walk you through them. (These are in no particular order.)

The Font – The original font for **Magic** card titles is called Goudy Medieval. It was selected because it had a very fantasy feel to it. Unfortunately, it's a hard font to read from a distance. In addition, whenever we had to use lower case letters, they bumped into the bevel above the art box. The font for the rules text, incidentally, has not changed on the new cards.

Another thing that I think it's important to remember is that advanced players recognize the cards from the art. It is the less experienced players that need to be able to read the card titles. The reason most serious players don't have a problem reading the old font is because they don't actually read it.

The Lettering – Because Jesper Myrfors, the game's original art director, wanted the frame all connected, he chose to use white lettering for all the text not in the actual "text box." Light lettering on a dark background is harder to read than dark lettering on a light background. In addition, white text on a white card frame was particularly hard to read from any distance.

The Textures – Some of the textures used for the original card frames do not connect as naturally to their color's flavor as you would expect. Look at a white card, for example. The background is a lace doily. What does a doily have to with white's flavor? I have no idea.

Power/Toughness – The power and toughness of a creature is a very important statistic. Richard Garfield's biggest problem with the old card frames was that they didn't put enough focus on this important part of the card.

Frame Distribution – A **Magic** card face has a limited "real estate." There's only so much room that we can use to place the elements of the card. The old card frames used more real estate than we thought was necessary to convey the color of the card. This space came at the expense of the other aspects.

Art Focus – Jeremy Cranford, the current **Magic** art director, summed up his biggest problem with the old cards with a metaphor. He compared the card frame to the frame on a piece of art. A good frame focuses the viewer on the art, not the frame. The old **Magic** card frames drew too much attention to themselves and not enough to the art.

This, of course, leads to:

Question #3: Why Are The New Frames Better?

Let's address the problems from the last section.

The Font – The new title font was selected for its ability to be read from far away. Is it less "medieval" than the old font? Yes. Is it easier to read? Yes. Flavor butted heads with function, and we chose function.

The Lettering – Dark lettering on a light background is easier to read. When you put an old and a new **Magic** card side by side, this difference is startling. The new boxes around the name, card type and power/toughness are necessary because the majority of the frame has a dark color to allow the cards to be easy to identify. In order to use dark lettering, we had to separate the light background from the dark background. Thus, the boxes.

The Textures – In redoing the card's textures, the design team took great care to match the textures with the flavors of the colors. It's hard to see on the scans on-line, but the richness in the detail (such as the leaf in the background of the green frame, for instance) is very elegant.

Power/Toughness – The power and toughness now have much greater focus than before. Part of this is having its own box. Part of it is the contrast of having dark letters on a light background.

Frame Distribution – The card frame is smaller. In exchange, the art box is bigger. The rules textbox is bigger. There's more space for names and for card types. This change will have actual game play applications. There are cards that we couldn't print before that now fit in the text boxes. There are longer names and creature type combinations that are now available. And the art? Well, read on.

Art Focus – Probably the biggest aesthetic change with the new card frames is that the focus is now more clearly on the art. For starters the art box is larger, but more importantly the card frames now focus the eye to the art. This is why, by the way, I don't agree with the assessment that the new frames are less "fantasy" than the old ones. I believe that the fantasy focus is merely different. The old frames added fantasy elements all over the card. The new frames instead draw the focus to the one card element that I believe is the most effective in capturing the fantasy flavor: the art.

Question #4 – Why Weren't The Players Asked Their Opinion?

One of the common complaints seems to derive from the fact that so many players felt "out of the loop." I take this as a compliment that MagicTheGathering.com has made the players feel "in the loop." I'm quite touched that features like "You Make the Card" and "Selecting Eighth Edition" have gone over so well. I'm honored that we've been able to find more ways to get you all involved in the game. And we plan to do more in future. But, let me be blunt, we cannot, and I believe should not, bring every decision to the public. Let's take the topic of the card frames as an example.

Group Mentality – One of the problems with polling the public is that people react differently in a group than they do as individuals. Individuals tend to absorb information before responding. Groups simply react. Change, in particular, always has a strong reaction, seldom positive. Let's examine two big changes in **Magic's** past: the introduction of Standard and the introduction of the Sixth Edition rules. In both cases, the group reaction was quick and loud. "We hate it!" "It's ruining the game!" "I'm quitting!"

In each case, we were making a change that was going to have a fundamental impact on how **Magic** was played. I don't think the strong reaction was uncalled for. But I do think key decisions shouldn't be made in that atmosphere.

In retrospect, I think most players agree that both items were a positive addition to the game. In time, the calmness of the individual overtook the knee-jerk reaction of the group. I believe this will also be the case with the card frames. In short, the reason we never ask the audience, "Should we make this change?" is that the answer will almost always be no. And while change is scary, it often is necessary.

Focus – Polling the public requires creating focus. We want the public to communicate with one another and create discussions amongst themselves and with us. To do this, we have to stick to one topic at a time. For *Eighth Edition*, we felt that allowing the players to select cards was more practical and rewarding than polling the new card face.

Complexity – While R&D takes a lot of ribbing on the 'Net, we are trained professionals. It is our job to examine these issues in greater detail than most of you would want to. There are many

questions that I believe you would rather have R&D decide than the public.

Timeliness – We have to make our decisions over a year ahead. Often this means that the public will not have much of the data we have to make the decision. While this is less true for card frames than some other topics, asking all of you would have had to be done without you knowing some of the ramifications of the choices.

Artistic Vision – The creative process does not work well by committee. The best result is to find a creative person with vision and let him make all the decisions to allow a unity to the choices. That's what we did with the card frames.



Surprise – One of the great parts of **Magic** is the discovery process. To allow you all to make key decisions, we would have to ruin the surprise. We don't want to do that.

Before I move on to the next question, I do want to stress that just because we didn't ask the public doesn't mean that we didn't seek the input of **Magic** players. Wizards is a big company. Many of our employees (some having absolutely nothing to do with making **Magic**) play **Magic**. We did make an effort to get input from **Magic** players inside the company. In addition, R&D mocked up the cards for the FFL (the Future Future League – our internal playtest league) so we would get several months worth of data of how they actually played.

This, of course, leads to the next question:

Question #5 – If There Something We Can Do To Stop This?

To be honest, no. We are past the point where we can change the decision. This doesn't mean we don't want feedback, but it does mean that players shouldn't put their focus on trying to change the decision. It's too late.

Question #6 – Why Didn't You Tell Us Earlier?

We felt that six months was enough time for the players to digest the change before being faced with the actual cards. As we weren't planning to change the decision based on the initial reaction (which we expected to be negative), we didn't see any need to announce the change any earlier. In addition, we wanted to start the year with an introduction to the 10th Anniversary celebration and this seemed like the perfect opportunity to introduce the new card faces.

Question #7 – Don't You Care What The Players Think?

Of course we care. We care a great deal. But R&D's job is to make decisions based on what we believe will be best for the game, and thus the players, long term. So far, we have a very good track record. I believe **Magic** is the healthiest it's ever been in the history of the game.

This boils down to trust. Look back at the past decisions we've made. How many of them panned out to be the right ones? I believe the vast majority. So please, I understand that some of you are currently unhappy. I hear that some of you think we've made a mistake. All I'm asking is that you give the card frames a chance. Trust R&D that we share your concerns to keep **Magic** the best game possible.


Please trust us. I think we've earned it.

Join me next week when I examine what's white with the world.

Until then, may you give something new a chance.

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