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**Making Magic** Monday, February 17, 2003

# Banned on the Run



Mark Rosewater

## A discussion in three parts

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Welcome to Banned and Restricted Week! This week we'll be looking at a number of the cards that R&D possibly might have goofed up on. For my column, I thought I start of the week by explaining Wizards' philosophy behind bannings and restrictions and answer a number of other often-asked questions. Since this won't take up my entire column, I'm also going to talk about the design of some banned/restricted cards. And finally, a plea for help that has nothing to do with the topic at hand.

## Everything You Wanted To Know About Banning And Restricting Cards But Were Afraid To Ask

### What is Wizards of the Coast's philosophy about banning and/or restricting cards?

Our philosophy is simple: "Don't ban or restrict cards unless we absolutely have to."

Why? Because we understand that the vast majority of **Magic** players, even those that never play in tournaments follow the [official Banned and Restricted List](#). That means each time we ban or restrict a card, we are taking something that all of you spent money on and aren't letting you play with it. We take this very seriously. As such, we have a very high barrier for banning or restricting a card.

### That said, why does Wizards of the Coast ban and restrict cards?

We ban and restrict cards because we believe there is something worse than not allowing players to use a particular card, and that is having a play environment become so degenerate that the game is no longer fun. Sometimes individual cards have to be sacrificed for the needs of the larger game.



Banning a card from Type 1 would essentially mean "removing it from **Magic**," which is something we are very hesitant to do.

### Why do you sometimes ban cards and sometimes restrict them?

To be clear, with the exception of one format (Vintage, aka Type 1), we use only a Banned List.

### Why are cards restricted in Vintage?

The reason is that we feel that Vintage is the one format where all the cards can be played. As such, we have gone to great lengths to keep all the cards available in the format. You will notice that currently cards are only banned in Vintage for one of two reasons. One, they require manual flipping, which is quite disruptive in sanctioned play. Or two, they involve ante. There are no cards presently banned for power concerns.

### Why aren't cards restricted in other formats?

Restricting a card makes games more swingy as the variance of drawing the powerful card has a huge impact on the game. We accept the swinginess in Vintage as we want players to have access to all the cards. But in other formats, we err on the side of making the formats a little less luck-based.

### How exactly does a card get banned or restricted?

Here's how it works. There is a team called the R&D Events Team. This team includes numerous R&D people (myself included) who have interactions with Organized Play. This team collects data that includes consulting with numerous outside players. Four times a year, the R&D Events Team makes an official recommendation to the Organized Play department. Then on four pre-assigned dates (March 1st, June 1st, September 1st and December 1st), the Organized Play department announces any changes to the banned and restricted list of any supported format. The banning and restriction begins a month after the announcement (April 1st, July 1st, October 1st, and January 1st).

### Why does Wizards unban or unrestrict cards?

**Magic** has an evolving metagame. Sometimes cards that were problematic years ago are no longer a problem due to the shift in the metagame. If we believe the shift to be a permanent one (we don't foresee having to ban the card again in the distant future), we will follow our philosophy of letting the players play with as many of the cards as possible and unrestrict (or unban) the card.

### Why did you ban **Kird Ape** in the original Extended format when **Hypnotic Specter** was not?

I'll let you in on a little secret. We're not infallible. We occasionally, gasp, make mistakes. We correct them when we catch them, but hey nobody's perfect. Was the above a mistake? To quote my grandfather: "If it looks like a duck, quacks like a duck, and has a giant sign on it that says: 'I'm a freakin' duck!', odds are, it might be a duck."

## Where Did I Go Wrong?

I have the lovely distinction of having designed more banned and restricted cards than anyone save Richard Garfield. I thought it might be interesting to look at some of my cards to see how they came to be.



Some of Mark's handiwork.

**Crop Rotation (restricted in Vintage)** – I came up with this card during *Urza's Legacy* design. Here is the submitted version:

Rampant Folly



Instant

At the time you play **CARDNAME**, sacrifice a land.

Search your library for a land card and put that land into play. Shuffle your library afterwards.

At the time, I had a discussion with Bill Rose on whether this card would ever get played. I said yes. Bill didn't think so. (The "Folly" in the name was Bill making fun of the card.) But he enjoyed the argument so he put the card in the set to see. As the card ended up on the Restricted List, I'll put this in the "I won" pile. The only reason this card is restricted is that most tutors (cards that let you get specific cards out of your deck) are restricted due to the high number of other "broken" restricted cards, in this case **Library of Alexandria** and **Tolarian Academy**.

**Dream Halls (banned in Extended, restricted in Vintage)** – This card was inspired by the "pitch spells" from *Alliances*. The card as turned in during design:

Pitch World



Enchant World

Instead of paying the casting cost for any spell, any player may choose a card of the same color in his or her hand and remove it from the game.

I talked a great deal about the design of this card in my article "[Mistakes? I've Made a Few](#)," so there's not much to add here. The little point that wasn't discussed previously is that this card was originally an enchant world. But by the time we got to *Stronghold*, we had given up on that card type.

**Earthcraft (banned in Extended)** – This card started as a simple idea. *Ley Druid* was an interesting green creature. How about an enchantment that gives the *Ley Druid* ability to all your creatures? The original card looked like this:

Earthcraft



Enchantment

Each creature you control gains "G: Untap target basic land."

At first glance, this might seem like the same card, but there is one key difference. The original version text spliced the ability onto creatures. This is important because it prevented endless loops since new creatures that were created would have "summoning sickness" and thus couldn't be used to untap more lands to play additional creatures. (A quick aside – the term "summoning sickness" is no longer in the rules, but there is no new term to describe what "summoning sickness" used to mean and I refuse to use the term "doesn't have haste" or "has been under your control since the beginning of your most recent turn" or whatever, so I have rebelliously used the term "summoning sickness." So there!)

Why the change? Well, I happen to dig up the design notes from our database and discovered the culprit: JLM. (JLM, by the way, is Joel L. Mick, who at different times used to be **Magic** Lead Designer and Magic Brand Manager. The cards *Jalum Tome* and *Jalum Grifter* are both named after him. He was also the model for the art of *Jalum Grifter*. At the time of this note, he was **Magic** Lead Designer.)

```
3.05 JLM Stop the needless text splicing. Word as "Tap an untapped creature you control: Untap target land."
3.07 MR We should examine whether or not this needs to only affect basic lands.
I prefer basic lands.
I think Joel's wording is more complicated.
```

The last two notes weren't signed but were by either Bill Rose, Mike Elliott, William Jockusch, or Henry Stern. As you can see, while I'm not responsible for the de-splicing of the card, if left to my own devices you might see Vintage players using this card to untap *Tolarian Academy* or *Gaea's Cradle*.

**Frantic Search (restricted in Vintage) / Time Spiral (banned in Extended, restricted in Vintage)** – I've grouped these two cards together as my culpability lies in creating the "free" mechanic. During *Urza's Saga* design, I was trying to find an alternate to cantrips. Instead of not losing the card, what if it didn't cost you any mana? But how do you do that on a colored spell? I didn't like the *Kobold* experiment in *Legends* as I feel colored cards should be defined by the color used in their mana. Then the answer hit me. What if you had to pay for the spell, but upon resolution, the spell gave you back your mana? I naively chose "untap N lands" to achieve this.

As we started playing around with the mechanic, we realized that it could go on big spells as well as small ones. *Time Spiral* was actually created during development. We were trying to create more "free" spells. If my memory serves me William Jockusch suggested *Timetwister*. He felt it would have great synergy with the "free" mechanic. And apparently he was correct.

*Frantic Search*, on the other hand, was created during design (I don't remember if it was during *Urza's Saga* design and pushed off or during *Urza's Legacy* design). Here is how it appeared when it was turned into *Urza's Legacy* development:

Free Filter



Sorcery

When you play CARDNAME, untap up to two lands.  
Draw three cards, then choose and discard two cards.

The interesting debate is whether or not this better or worse than the released card. True, this version lets you draw three cards instead of two but by being a mana cheaper, it only untaps two

lands.

Someday I'll do an article on the worst mechanics in **Magic**. The "free" mechanic has a special space reserved in that article.

**Lotus Petal (banned in Extended, restricted in Vintage)** – This card shows how crazy **Black Lotus** is. During *Tempest* design, I thought it would be flavorful to make new "fixed" **Black Lotus**. Since I liked the idea of a 0 cost artifact, I lowered the number of mana it produced. The development team even questioned if it was too weak. In the end though we felt like the card might find some use in a very niche deck. I guess the niche decks were degenerate decks.

**Memory Jar (banned in Extended, restricted in Vintage)** – The original version of this card had one key difference:

Magic Wand

5

Artifact

☞, Sacrifice Magic Wand: Each player sets aside his or her hand and draws a new hand of as many cards as he or she set aside. At end of turn, each player discards his or her hand and returns each card set aside this way to his or her hand.

Rather than draw seven cards, you drew cards equal to the number of cards you had in your hand. This version wouldn't have been as effective in the decks that used **Memory Jar**, but perhaps it would have spawned a different type of degenerate deck. The problem in design is that I thought of the card as a goofy trick card rather than as an efficient card drawer.



**Mind Over Matter (banned in Extended, restricted in Vintage)** – I also talked about this card in my column "[Mistakes? I've Made a Few.](#)" Not much to add here.

**Replenish (banned in Extended)** – This card was heavily influenced by **Living Death** (designed by Mike Elliott in *Tempest*). Why didn't I make the card symmetrical like **Living Death**? I honestly don't know. In retrospect I wish I did. When I created this card I thought I was making a fun Johnny card with possible fringe use by Spike. Anyway, here's how the card appeared in its earliest version:

Spirit Syphon

3\*\*\*

Sorcery

Return all enchantments in your graveyard to play.

Only two things changed in development. The cost was dropped to 3\* and the card was properly templated to say "enchantment cards."

**Tinker (restricted in Vintage)** – For a long time, my favorite expansion was *Antiquities*. For those not around at the time it was released, it was very picked on in its day. I'm not sure why, but it was the first "worst expansion ever." (Technically, I guess *Arabian Nights* must have been called that by someone, but it wasn't until *Antiquities* that the public en masse made this cry.) I used to constantly defend the set. One reason is that I had a number of very fun artifact decks. As such, one of my favorite cards was **Transmute Artifact**.

Years later while designing *Urza's Saga* (and yes, the card didn't end up in a set until *Urza's Legacy*), I thought it would be cool to update the card. My fatal mistake was that I tried to clean up the card to make it less wordy. As such, I got rid of the "pay the mana difference between the two artifacts" part. This is one of the most common mistakes made by designers. Richard Garfield built an excellent resource management system (lands and mana) and we often circumvent it with cards that let you play cards regardless of their costs. **Tinker** is one of the worst offenders.

**Voltaic Key (restricted in Vintage)** – For many years in the magazines *The Duelist* and *Topdeck* (and still occasionally in the **Magic** Player Guides) I had a puzzle column called "Magic: The Puzzling." Over the years I have done over one hundred puzzles. There are certain cards I dubbed "Puzzling" cards because they work really well in the puzzles. One such "Puzzling" card was **Jandor's Saddlebags**.

**Jandor's Saddlebags** is one of those cards that has been around forever (it premiered in *Arabian Nights* and appeared in *Revised*, *Fourth*, *Fifth*, and *Seventh Edition*) yet never gets paid much attention. The reason it's so valuable in puzzles is because it lets you untap a creature. Because the average puzzle is always filled with creatures with activated abilities (most often requiring tapping), **Jandor's Saddlebags** creates a nice fork in the road for puzzle goers.

With that in mind, I set out to create a **Jandor's Saddlebags** for artifacts. Here's the card that I turned in during *Urza's Saga* design:

Urza's Wand



Artifact

: Untap target artifact.

The current version, I believe, is weaker than this as the original was more mana efficient once you got it into play. Once again, (this is a theme to my broken cards) this card was designed with Johnny in mind not Spike.

**Yawgmoth's Bargain (banned in Extended, restricted in Vintage)** – This card was created not to be a weaker **Necropotence** (which it isn't) but to be a better **Greed**. I always liked the card **Greed** but felt it was just too weak to ever play. So during *Urza's Destiny*, I designed the following card:

Intolerance



Enchantment

Skip your draw phase.

Pay 2 life: Draw a card.

The name is an inside film joke (I was a broadcast & film major in college). Both **Greed** and **Intolerance** are famous silent movies. I liked the idea of a clean exchange of cards for life. I always felt the delay of **Necropotence** to be a little wonky. I'm not sure if this version is broken (it might be) but I do know 1 life for 1 card at almost any reasonable price is. Sure, 20/20 hindsight.

As you can see, each card came with its own design lesson (beyond reprint this card). Note that the last cards banned in any format was **Lin Sivvi** and **Rishadan Port** in *Mercadian Masques* block constructed. So we seem to have learned some of these lessons.

## I Couldn't Have Done It Without You

This final section doesn't really have anything to do with Banned and Restricted Week. I just wanted to take a moment to thank all of you that voted me into the Wizards Invitational. For those that are unfamiliar, this event is based on the **Magic** Invitational except that the participants are employees of Wizards of the Coast rather than pro players. For more info, see [Randy's column](#) from last Friday.

Here's my problem. While I have some good **Magic** design skills, my play skills suck. I'm not incompetent; I just don't have the experience of many of my fellow competitors. In fact, I feel I have only one competitive advantage: all of you. So I'm asking for your help.

The event has five formats, two of which require constructed decks. I need your help building those two constructed decks. I promise to credit the designer of each deck I play. Here's what I'm looking for: My goal isn't to win; my goal is to create an entertaining event. Thus, I want decent decks (decks that are capable of winning), but decks that are fun to play and watch, and at the same time showcase some of the new *Legions* cards. I want decks that people will enjoy seeing me play and that they can copy and play themselves after the event. The rules for these two constructed formats are in [Randy's column](#).

Finally, anyone who wants to have some fun playtesting any of the five formats can feel free to send me any valuable information that learn from their playtests. All email should be sent to me at [makingmagic@wizards.com](mailto:makingmagic@wizards.com).

Thanks for all your help.


Join me next week when I talk about flavor in **Magic**.

Until then, may you get to play with all your cards.

Mark Rosewater

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Mark may be reached at [makingmagic@wizards.com](mailto:makingmagic@wizards.com).

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