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Making Magic Monday, February 24, 2003

Bursting with Flavor



Mark Rosewater

Why Magic is still so delicious

O kay, I'm tapping permanent #2386 to lower your point value from 20 to 17."
 "Oh, no you don't. I use non-permanent card #708 to exceed your permanent's defense variable thus forcing you to put it into your discard pile."

"But wait. I have non-permanent card #87 which allows me to render the ability of your non-permanent useless. This means my permanent will be able to proceed with its point lowering ability."

"Damn, I hate non-permanent card #87 and its ilk!"

As you can see, **Magic** without flavor is simply not **Magic**. But what exactly is the role of flavor in **Magic**? How does R&D think about flavor and what are we doing to improve flavor in the game? All good questions which will be answered in this week's column dedicated to flavor in **Magic**.

Flavor & Function

I think I should begin by talking about the role of flavor and function in game design. When you sit down to create a game, those two are the forces you have to think about. Function is how the game plays. It focuses on making sure that there is a definable win condition, that the game has intriguing interaction between the players, and that there are basics like a catch-up feature. Function is concerned with the game playing as cleanly as possible.

Flavor, on the other hand, gives the game a metaphor. The importance of flavor is two-fold. First, having a good metaphor eases game play. If players can apply outside knowledge to implicitly understand game rules, the game's complexity goes down. (It is my belief that good game designers strive to reduce complexity.)

The second thing flavor does is make the game "sexy." In game design terms, sexy means that the game attracts players to it. By just looking at the box and the elements of the game, players want to play it. This could be because the subject matter is of interest to them ("Oh, a *Simpsons* trivia game.") or because the graphics just look cool ("That monster looks awesome.").

Magic's flavor is important because it accomplishes both tasks very effectively. First, the metaphor of two wizards fighting a magical duel makes many elements of the game very natural. How does a Lightning Bolt work? Oh, you can use it to hit your opponent or a creature. That makes sense. Second, the flavor of **Magic** just looks cool. I've heard many players' stories about how they started playing **Magic** that begins with becoming interested in the game by seeing the cards.

Flavor vs. Function

Several weeks back I wrote an article about the new card frames being introduced in *Eighth Edition* ("[Frames of Reference](#)"). In explaining the reasons behind the change I brought up an age-old conflict in R&D, flavor vs. function. I said that both were important but when the two butted heads, R&D has decided to lean towards function. This comment has spawned a lot of feedback



in my mail and on the message boards. I have noticed a number of misconceptions that I want to address.

Myth #1 – Choosing Function Over Flavor Means Function Is More Important - While I understand why people might jump to this conclusion, this isn't the reason. Why choose function over flavor? Because function has much less flexibility than flavor. In the functionality of game design, there usually is a single best answer. For flavor, there are many answers. Thus, when the two butt heads, the more flexible item needs to give in to the less flexible. Flavor, thus, isn't less important than function. It's merely more adaptable.

Myth #2 – Flavor And Function Are Opposites - This misconception comes from the fact that the two at times come into conflict. This doesn't mean they are opposites. They're not. As I explained above, the two are the key forces that go into making a game. The best games are the ones that bring the two forces together in harmony. This union, I believe, is one of **Magic's** greatest strengths.

Myth #3 – Flavor And Function Are In Constant Conflict - This misconception stems from the same place as the last one. Just because flavor and function *can* bump heads doesn't mean they *always* bump heads. In fact, more often than not the two complement one another.

Myth #4 – Game Mechanics Are The Opposite of Flavor - This myth comes from the fact that most people think function and game mechanics are synonymous, and that flavor and function are opposites (see myth #2) . This is a misunderstanding of the role of game mechanics. Game mechanics (like names, mana costs, card types, flavor text, power and toughness) are a tool used to create a **Magic** card. This tool can be used for flavor and for function. The best game mechanics, in fact, have both flavor and function. Let's take **Drain Life** as an example. The mechanic of **Drain Life** is both interesting in game play (function) and very rich in capturing what the color of black represents (flavor).

Myth #5 – R&D Hates Flavor - This is the one that prompted me to write this column. You see, personally, I have always been very invested in the flavor of the game. Besides designing cards, I have run name and flavor text teams. I've written art descriptions. I've worked on the background story. I've helped define the color wheel. I've even illustrated a **card**. (Although I don't think any artists need to spend a sleepless night worrying about me stealing their gig) I personally care a great deal about flavor. But I'm not alone. R&D recognizes the value of flavor. It's a very important tool in game design and development. As my little interchange at the start of the column shows, flavor is fundamental to **Magic**. This is too big for a paragraph. Let's turn this discussion into a full-blown section:

Why Flavor Is Fundamental To Magic

Quick question: What is at the heart of **Magic**? When you dig down deep, what is at the game's core?

The color wheel. I've talked about this before, but this is important so I'll go into it in a little more depth. **Magic** is a game about conflict. You and your opponent are fighting. But you aren't fighting with mundane weapons; you're fighting with magic. This conflict meant that Richard Garfield had several daunting tasks when he first sat down to make the game. First, he had to build the conflict into the game. Why are you fighting? Next, he needed a way to differentiate the fights. The whole point of a trading card game was so that the game would be bigger than the box. To accomplish this though, Richard needed access to an entire world of possibilities.

In addition, Richard knew that he needed to have a complex metagame. This required having different deck archetypes. This, in turn, meant that he needed to find a way to keep players from just playing the best spells in every deck. Finally, Richard wanted to give different decks different personalities. The end result of all these problems was the creation of the color wheel. As I've said in other flavor based columns/articles ("[Hate is Enough](#)," "[It's Not Easy Being Green](#)," "[The Great White Way](#)") I believe the color wheel is one of the greatest innovations of Richard's and a major reason for **Magic's** success.

At the heart of **Magic** lies flavor. It is essential to the game's being. And remember, the color wheel is where the definitions of game mechanics come from. (Why is black the best at killing creatures? Because it's the color of death and its ideology allows it to kill others for its own benefit.) This means that flavor often dictates function. R&D's current examination of the color wheel shows that this trend continues to present day.

So does R&D hate flavor? Well, it eases game play. Makes the game more fun. It's an important tool for designing cards. And it lies at the heart of **Magic**. So, I'll go out on a limb and say that R&D actually (gasp) likes flavor.

The History of Flavor

I spend a great deal of time in my column talking about the evolution of game design. Game flavor has gone through a similar evolution. In the beginning, **Magic's** flavor was very "card-centric." What I mean by that was in Alpha Richard designed the game to maximize the flavor of individual cards. He made decisions based on what would most help each individual card's flavor. The reason Richard did this had a lot to do with the original target audience of **Magic**.



For those of you that don't know the "how **Magic** came to be" story, let me give you the *Reader's Digest* version. Richard and his friend, Mike Davis

Early on, the game tried to maximize the flavor on each card.

(former head of R&D and the man **Jayemdae Tome** is named after - J.M.D. Tome - J. Michael Davis) came to Wizards of the Coast, then a tiny role-playing game company to pitch Richard's game **RoboRally**. They met with Peter Adkison, one of the five founders of Wizards and the then CEO.

Peter really liked **RoboRally** but informed Richard and Mike that the game was too expensive for his company to produce. But Peter liked what he saw, so he told them what kind of game he was looking for. Peter wanted a small, portable game that was quick enough to be played between role-playing games. Richard had been working on game that he felt would fit Peter's needs. This game turned out to be **Magic**. As we all know, the story has a happy ending.

Anyway, **Magic** was originally designed to appeal to the then customers of Wizards of the Coast, role-players. As such, Richard took steps to make each card as flavorful as possible. But **Magic** quickly took a path that no one had foreseen. It created a new game category. And as such, it attracted a different audience. The driver for this audience was the flexibility of the game play and the depth of the metagame. Trading card gamers, it seems, focused on the game's customizability.

This change of focus had a profound impact on how flavor was used. For starters, it made R&D reevaluate the role of function. Function was no longer sacrificed for flavor. Extra rules text that added little game play was removed. Creature types were condensed. The rules no longer allowed cards to work independently. Each card had to fit into a larger rules structure.

In addition, the flavor people made an important secondary discovery. Because the focus of trading card games was customizability, the players looked at flavor in a bigger context than just card-by-card. They cared more about interconnectivity. As an example, let's take creature types. Under a card-by-card model, the flavor team wants to keep churning out new creature types. Each new creature type would explore virgin territory allowing for maximization of flavor.

But under a larger holistic approach, the flavor team wants to build a world. They want to create an interconnected environment that plays into the interconnectivity of the cards. In this model, instead of making new creature types all the time, you want to constantly reinforce the creature types you've already used. You want to create a world where elves and goblins have substance. You're creating not just an individual creature, but part of a race.

Environment Versus Story

That discovery led to another interesting debate. There are two ways to build continuity in a trading card game. You can build your flavor either around a story or around an environment. During **Magic's** history, both versions have been tried. The biggest attempt to build around story was the *Weatherlight* Saga (told in the expansions *Weatherlight* through *Apocalypse*). In the end, the flavor team realized that the trading card genre does not lend itself well to telling stories. The big experiment essentially failed. But it did teach us some very valuable lessons that will have an impact on **Magic** sets to come.

You see, the *Odyssey* and *Onslaught* blocks have been a transition. We are moving from a story-based flavor to an environment-based flavor. *Mirrodin* (the 2003 large fall expansion) is the first expansion in a new era of **Magic** flavor. During the last two years, we have been able to put

together a new creative team. More importantly, this team has refocused how they are approaching **Magic's** flavor.

We are no longer trying to tell a story. The elements (the people, places, and things) will exist in the cards, but the game will make no attempt to explain how those items interconnect. The story will be left to the novels. Instead, **Magic** Creative is focusing on showing an environment. As you look through the cards in an expansion you will be exploring the world presented in the cards. While trading card games may not lend themselves to telling story, they are excellent at presenting an environment.

In addition, the *Mirrodin* block will return to a trend of olden days in that it will take place in a new world. The *Mirrodin* block will visit a brand new plane (named Mirrodin for those that were wondering what the expansion name meant) that we have never seen before. I have had the privilege of seeing what the Creative Team has been doing and I think it's going to knock your socks off. *Mirrodin* has a distinct and very fresh look. (And don't worry, R&D has "upped it's game" to match what the Creative Team has done.)



Magic is a great meadium for presenting an environment.

In the meantime, *Legions* and *Scourge* should give you a taste of what the new Creative Team has to offer. While they didn't build Otaria, they cut their teeth giving these two sets a rather unique feel.

Flavor And The Future

Hopefully my column has given you a little better insight into where flavor has been and where it's going. More importantly, I hope I've managed to stress the value that R&D places on flavor. So for those of you out there that feel we're abandoning flavor, my message to you is simple: We're not. These last few years have been an adjustment period, but I promise you that flavor is about to make a strong comeback.

Join me next week when I dig up something and talk about it.


Until then, may you take the time to read the flavor text.

Mark Rosewater

Wait, wait! I'm not done yet. Yeah, I know I've done my traditional closing, but I have to talk to you quickly about the week after next. Why? Because I need your help. You see, in two weeks I'm going to be dedicating my column to an interview. Of me. By all of you. Yes, we're going to try a little experiment. You see, I get interviewed all the time, but more often than not, the questions suck. What I want is some interesting questions. Is there anything about me or **Magic** or my interaction with **Magic** that you want to know about? The questions can be hard-hitting and serious or could be laid back and funny. All I ask is that you take some time to make the questions good. Also, I will credit each question with the name of the person who sent it to me (if you want to remain anonymous please let me know).

Did I just assign homework? Yes, I did. But I if you guys do your part, I promise a candid and entertaining interview. Got it? Good. See you next week.

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