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Making Magic Monday, March 17, 2003

Danger, Will Robinson



Mark Rosewater

Mechanics that trip R&D up

Fool me once, shame on you.
 Fool me twice, shame on me.
 Fool me thirteen times, let's make a theme week about it.

Welcome to Card Drawing Week! This week we'll be talking about the many ways in **Magic** to fill up your hand.

"Walk Away Man, Walk Away"

I'll have to be honest that when Aaron first informed me of the theme for this week, I wasn't horribly thrilled. I said, "Didn't we just do Banned & Restricted Week four weeks ago?"

You see, R&D has a sordid past when it comes to card drawing. The best way to explain this is to use a metaphor. Card drawing is like the really attractive but slightly unstable girl you knew in high school. (I used to refer to these women as "Danger, Will Robinson" girls because I always imagined the *Lost in Space* robot warning me away.) You're originally drawn in by their beauty. But once you're in the relationship, things start going badly, and it usually ends in a ball of flame.

But then six months later, you see her at a party. And she looks so good. Really good. So much so, that you begin to question your memory. You decide that maybe you made a mistake. Maybe there's a way this relationship can work. So, you try again. And, of course, walk away with soot all over your face.

Soon a cycle starts. Once the pain subsides, you keep getting caught back up in her attractive side. You rationalize that this time will be different and you give it one more chance. Again. And again. And again. But each time you walk away an injured man.

This is how I see R&D and card drawing. In our heart of hearts, we know good card drawing is dangerous. But that cool card keeps popping up and we start rationalizing:

"I'm paying life for the cards."
 "But I have to discard my entire hand."
 "I only get the seven cards until the end of the turn."
 "My opponent gets to divide the cards into two piles."
 "Okay, I'm paying life. And there's no waiting. But it's six mana."

And we get burned again and again and again.

The good news is that we've starting to get wise to card drawing's sexy "I won't be broken this time" glances. But we know we might slip, so we've created some rules for ourselves. When one of us begins getting lured in by the siren's call, another one of us will slap them and say, "No one card should draw that many cards."

"But..."

"Timetwister."



"I..."

"Wheel of Fortune."

"Maybe..."

"Memory Jar. For the love of god, Memory Jar!"

The general rule of thumb we use know is that any card that lets you draw more than one card goes under the microscope. If it allows you to draw three or more cards in a single turn, we do a full body cavity search.

Soft Spots

But card drawing isn't our only vulnerability. Oh no, R&D has its share of weaknesses. I thought in today's column I'd explore our "Danger, Will Robinson!" mechanics.

The easiest way to do this is to look at the [Type 1 Restricted list](#).

First we have to take out the card drawers:

- Ancestral Recall
- Braingeyser
- Fact or Fiction
- Library of Alexandria
- Memory Jar
- Necropotence
- Stroke of Genius
- Time Spiral
- Timetwister
- Wheel of Fortune
- Windfall
- Yawgmoth's Bargain
- Yawgmoth's Will

Next I'll remove the Tutors/Regowths/Search cards. These cards are only restricted in Type 1 because they give you easier access to the broken cards:

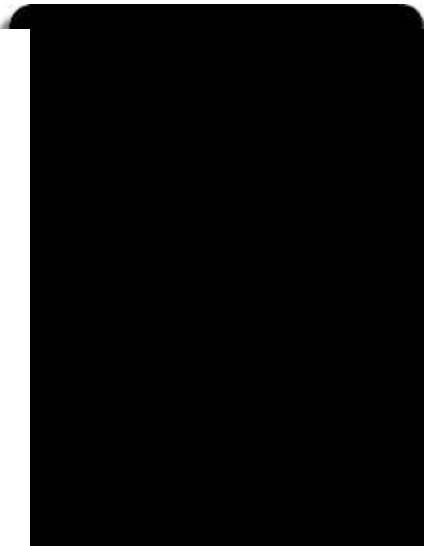
- Crop Rotation
- Demonic Consultation
- Demonic Tutor
- Doomsday
- Enlightened Tutor
- Entomb
- Frantic Search
- Mystical Tutor
- Regrowth
- Vampiric Tutor

Okay, now it's time to peek at the skeletons in R&D's closet.

Man, Oh Mana

We begin with list #1:

- Black Lotus
- Grim Monolith
- Lotus Petal
- Mana Crypt
- Mana Vault
- Mox Diamond
- Mox Emerald
- Mox Jet
- Mox Pearl
- Mox Ruby
- Mox Sapphire
- Sol Ring
- Tolarian Academy



What do these cards have in common? Obviously, they all add mana to your mana pool. But there's a more specific connection. All the cards (save *Tolarian Academy* which is a land) produce more mana than they cost to play. In R&D-speak, we refer to these as "fast mana."

You see, Richard Garfield was kind enough to create a wonderful management resource for the game (what you would call land and mana.) Cards like this let you do things many turns before you're supposed to. Thus, they cause problems.

Our answer to this problem is two-fold. First, we no longer make cards that produce more mana than they cost to play. Second, we've stopped making lands that produce more than one mana. The second rule has the occasional exception, but the card has to go under intense scrutiny.

Rev Your Engines

Here's list #2:

- *Channel*
- *Earthcraft*
- *Fastbond*
- *Mind Over Matter*
- *Voltaic Key*

In R&D we call these "engine" cards as they allow you to transform one resource into another. All five of these engine cards transform various resources into mana. And as we've learned above, lots of mana can cause problems.

The answer to this problem is for us to red flag all engine cards, particularly ones that transform resources into mana.

Born Free

Next is list #3:

- *Dream Halls*
- *Fork*
- *Tinker*

Don't be fooled by the brevity of this list. This is one of the most dangerous areas of **Magic** design. These cards avoid the mana issue by circumventing paying the mana cost. Why speed up Richard's resource management system when you can just avoid it all together?

This area is a hard one to avoid as it's full of very "fun" opportunities. As such, we still make cards that avoid mana costs, but we do so very cautiously.

Odds & Ends

Here are the remaining cards with the lessons R&D has learned:

- *Balance*

This card is full of lessons. Symmetrical effects (the same thing happens to everyone) don't get you much of a discount in the mana cost because they're too easy to work around. Mass creature destruction shouldn't be cheap. Mass land destruction shouldn't be cheap. Total hand denial shouldn't be cheap. And you shouldn't put all three on one card for two mana.

- *Black Vise*



Magic is no fun if the game is half over before you can do anything about it. Effects this powerful and this punishing of the starting game state (a full hand of cards) shouldn't be this cheap.

- **Mind Twist**

Card advantage (and if this is a concept you don't understand, be sure to check out "Learning Curve" this Wednesday) shows that mass discard is just a reflection of mass card drawing. And thus, a problem.

- **Strip Mine**

Stone Rain is a lot better when it's free and uncounterable. In addition, very cheap land denial makes the game less fun.

- **Time Walk**

Draw a card, untap all your permanents and get an additional attack phase is a mighty collection of abilities. Price it accordingly.



“Just When I Thought That I Was Out...”

Now that I've laid down some of our rules, let me tell you the most important rule, the rule that I believe defines **Magic**: Any rule can be broken. This doesn't mean that rules should be broken for no reason. And it doesn't mean that there shouldn't be strictly enforced rules. But if there's a good reason to break a rule, R&D shouldn't dismiss it out of hand. As such, you haven't seen the end of the dangerous areas described above.


Card drawing will bat her eyes as us again. And one day, we'll give it another go. Hopefully, a little more cautiously, but we'll be seeing her again. The same goes for fast mana, mana engines, mana cost avoiders, and other items listed above. So, please don't see this article as a sign that R&D refuses to walk the edge. Someday you'll see that we are willing to push the envelope again. But we do so with the wisdom of a few life lessons.

Join me next week, when I return to the interviewee chair and share some of my thoughts about how I see **Magic**.

Until then, may you occasionally heed the warning of the robot with the flailing arms.

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