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Rules of the Game

Structure breeds creativity



Mark Rosewater

Everyone has their dangerous hobbies. Some people hang glide, others bungee jump. Me? I write columns where I talk about the rules of design. Why is this so dangerous? Because there is a fervent group of players out there who believe "the rules" are destroying the game. So every time I put pen to paper and reveal yet another rule, I get a torrent of mail acting like I'm on the brink of bringing about Armageddon.

Now, I'm a big fan of irony. One of my favorite books is *Catch-22*, an intriguing novel with a chewy ironic center. So, I find this reaction a bit entertaining as I believe the rules are the most important thing keeping **Magic** from dying.

What's more dangerous than mentioning the rules? Defending them. Yes, this week I'll be exploring why we have rules for **Magic** design and talking about many of the common misconceptions that I believe lead to the anti-rules mentality.

One last thing before we move on. In this column, when I say "the rules" I am talking about the rules that govern the design of the game and not the thing that the judges use to tell you how two cards interact.



Follow The Rules

To quote a famous singing nanny/nun, let's start at the very beginning. Why does **Magic** design need rules? What roles do they serve?

Magic is a game in flux that constantly evolves. The danger of all this shifting is that the game can be easily led astray. It's the job of the designers (and developers) to keep the game in line so that it doesn't devolve itself into oblivion. To do this, R&D has a handy dandy Swiss Army knife of tools known as the rules.

The rules serve this task by providing four major functions:

1. **Structure** – There is chaos and there is order. One is used to build things and the other to destroy them. Design is a process of building, so we embrace order. As such, order dictates structure. To work smoothly, it helps to have an outline of what you're trying to accomplish. Whether this is a skeleton, a schedule, a set of schematics or even a basic plan, structure allows the builder to look at the big picture and figure out the hodgepodge of details that must be coordinated. Rules are the building blocks of structure as they help connect the various loose ends into very concrete concepts.
2. **Clarity** – One of the death knells of organization is ambiguity. Things unravel quickly when people are unable to properly communicate with one another. Rules reduce ambiguity by creating rigid definitions.
3. **Consistency** – Numerous people work on **Magic** design. But the game needs to have a singular vision. How do many minds act as one? Rules. Rules can be used as benchmarks to ensure that the designers have common ground to work from.

4. **Focus** – While change is the lifeblood of **Magic**, too much change is disconcerting and could have long-term negative ramifications. Design rules ensure that the designers aim their energies in similar directions.

Just as laws keep society from falling into anarchy so does the rules keep **Magic** from falling into the abyss. This may seem like hyperbole, but I swear it's not. **Magic** is a wild game that needs a firm hand.

Myth Takes

One of the biggest reasons I believe design rules get the rap they do is a number of basic misconceptions. I'd like to talk about the major ones to explain how these myths are faulty:

Myth #1 - Rules Are Obstacles To Creativity



This is probably the biggest myth that causes people to lash out against the rules. The problem is that this myth is based upon a false assumption. People like to believe that a world of infinite choices is more conducive to creativity than a world of finite choices. Essentially, the more choices available, the more chance for creative thought.

Unfortunately, scientific exploration into the means of creative thought has proven this not to be true. Testing has shown that restrictions actually aid creative thought. How is this possible? The answer rests in the human mind. It turns out that the mind isn't good at completely open-ended choices.

When faced with total freedom of options the brain retreats to known pathways. It simply repeats what worked last time it was in this situation.

Let's take an example. Suppose I locked a talented writer in a room. Once a week, I force him to write a short story. On the odd weeks, I let him write whatever he wants. On the even weeks, I give him a topic he has to write about. Will he be more creative on the odd or the even weeks? Research shows that the even weeks far outstrip the odd weeks.

Why? Because the even weeks force the writer's mind to new areas of thought. Perhaps the writer would never think to write a story about a trapeze artist, but tell him he has to write about the circus and the writer heads down pathways he's never tapped. In fact, experienced writers understand this phenomenon and thus build restrictions for themselves.

I used the above example as it parallels the writing of a weekly column. The non-theme weeks are much more brutal to write than the theme weeks. **Magic** design is no different. Tell me I can do anything and my mind retreats to old cards I've done. Tell me the set has to revolve around creature types and my brain starts firing away.

The counter-argument is that rules create known pathways thus forcing creative thought down old familiar roads. But this doesn't hold true for **Magic**. Why? Because the nature of the game forces design to constantly explore different themes. This means that each time a new problem is approached, the existing rules have to be rethought to examine how they function in the new environment.

Myth #2 - Rules Make It Harder To Work

This myth comes from a very basic misconception. Rules are not obstacles. Rules are tools. And the entire purpose of tools is to make working easier. Thus, rules help, not hurt. Here is a parallel example to demonstrate my point. Imagine people criticizing carpenters for using hammers because they limit how they can put nails into wood. It sounds silly, but it's not too far away from how I feel when this myth gets perpetuated. Rules make things easier, not harder.

Myth #3 - Rules Add Needless Complication

I think this myth comes from people focusing too tightly on a single rule. For example, let's take the "All Lands Must Produce Mana" rule from my article last week on the design of non-basic lands (["This Land Is My Land"](#)). Many players wrote in to me complaining that the rule added text to cards that didn't necessarily need the extra text. But the reasoning for this rule is much grander than a single card. The rule was created to help carve out an identity for the entire land card type. Once you step back and look at the larger objective, it's easier to see that individual cards might have to suffer slightly to aid the greater good.

Myth #4 - Art Is Not Supposed To Have Rules

I'm not quite sure where this myth comes from. My guess is that people see art as a right-brain activity and rule creation as a left-brain activity. But the two are fundamentally intermixed. Art, music, poetry, dance, photography, writing – each one is filled to the brim with rules. Whether it's called technique or theory or simply "the proper way," each form of art comes with its own discipline.

My background is in writing, so let me use it as an example. Let's imagine that one day you decided that you wanted to write a screenplay. Further more, let's assume that you don't want to have any training. Could you do it cold? Probably not. Why? Numerous reasons. First, you have no knowledge of the presentation. How many pages is a movie script? How is it formatted? How do I describe the action I want to see in such a way that the director understands it?

Second, you most likely don't know the fundamentals of storytelling. You see, audiences expect stories to be told in a certain fashion using something known as "three act structure." They will expect plot points and character arcs even though most of them don't even know what those items are. In short, without training, you will not have the tools necessary to complete your task.

Myth #5 – Rules Prevent Cool Cards From Being Made

Technically, this one's not a myth because it's true. But it does make a major assumption that is false. The assumption is that any cool card enhances the game. This just isn't true. Cool cards that compromise some key aspect of the game actually make the overall game less fun. Let's say I design a top-down design with cool flavor and a cool name that turns into a very quirky, neat blue **Lightning Bolt**. Individually the card might be cool, but giving direct damage to blue (again for the purists out there who remember **Psionic Blast**) would have dire consequences on game balance. In short, if a cool card has to break a rule to get made, more often than not, it's a sign that the card shouldn't be made.

Breaker, Breaker

Now that I've defended the rules, let me defend what I believe to be the most important rule:

If it makes sense in the context of the environment, rules can be broken.

Why is this rule the most important? Because it gives the designers the freedom to break out of the rules when it's necessary. But note that even the rule-breaking rule has its own rules:

#1 – Rules Should Be Broken Very Infrequently

– The excitement of a rule-breaking card is that it does something that isn't supposed to happen. In order for cards like this to be special, they have to be truly rare.

#2 – There Must Be A Good Reason For Breaking The Rule – Rules shouldn't be broken solely for the purpose of breaking a rule. Rules should be broken when they serve a larger purpose. A good example would be **Deep Analysis**. Normally, blue doesn't pay life as a cost. But in *Torment*, R&D was looking for a way to both expand the flashback mechanic and give the set the flavor of



the “black set.” Making a cycle of cards that paid life as a flashback costs very nicely fit both purposes.

#3 – Don’t Break The Same Rule Twice – It doesn’t take too many cards to form a trend. One card can be dismissed. But once two cards do something, you are beginning to rewrite flavor. Also, if you’ve been down this path before, you’re just rereading old ground. Find a new rule to break.

Rules of Attraction

And that in a large nutshell, is the value of the rules to design. As you can see, rules do a lot more work than most people are aware of. Designers embrace them because they understand their importance.

Join me next week, when I return to the jungle where the maro roam.

Until then, may you take time to stop and smell the rules.

Mark Rosewater

“Extra Helpings” - #1A (Tom Swifties)

Wait a minute. Didn’t the article just end? Yeah, it did. But this column you get a bonus extra feature that I’ll be running from time to time. During my on-line interview (“[Inquiring Minds Want to Know, Parts I & II](#)”) I realized how much my readers enjoyed participating in the column. In addition, I always felt that a design column should inspire occasional creativity. I combined these two ideas to come up with this feature.

So what is “Extra Helpings?” It’s a chance to share my love of wordplay and humor with all of you. I’ll be taking classic wordplays or formula jokes and asking for you to give them a **Magic** tweak. Still confused? Keep reading, I swear you’ll get it before I’m done.

For my first column, I’m starting with Tom Swifties. For those unfamiliar with this style of wordplay, let me give you some examples:

“I can’t brush my teeth,” Tom said aimlessly.
“I was born with only two ventricles,” Tom explained half-heartedly.
“I just love hot dogs,” Tom said frankly.

The best Tom Swifty I was ever able to create:

“Bingo!” Tom cried benignly. (I’m actually quite proud of this one.)

In case the examples aren’t clear... A Tom Swifty is a quote (always attributed to Tom) in which the content plays into the adverb (and sometimes the verb) that’s used in the sentence. In addition, the quote should reflect the word choice of the adverb & verb. If Tom is speaking aimlessly, for example, the quote should sound aimless.

I’ve always wondered what kind of Tom Swifties could be made with a **Magic** theme. For example:

“I can’t believe you dealt two damage to me,” Tom said, shocked.
“You didn’t really think you were going to play that spell,” Tom countered.

So, if you’re game, here’s what I want. Come up with **Magic**-themed Tom Swifties and send them to me at makingmagic@wizards.com. In a future column (labeled #1B) I’ll share the ones that tickled my fancy. Be aware that there’s no prize other than the recognition of your cleverness. So please make sure to include your name so I can give you credit if I choose one of your submissions.

Also, please include the words “Tom Swifty” in your header so I know it’s for this column. Lastly, as I expect to get some duplicated ideas, I will give credit to the first person that sends me the Tom Swifty.


Got it? You guys get creative and I show off your handiwork. I’m looking forward to see what you all can do. Future “Extra Helpings” will venture off in other directions.

And now my column’s really over.

No really, I mean it.

Until... I already did that. See you next week.

Mark may be reached at makingmagic@wizards.com.

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