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Making Magic Monday, April 21, 2003

Design 101

Common rookie mistakes



Mark Rosewater

During the last few weeks, I've begun making my pass on the mechanics submissions for "You Make the Card #2." Even restricting players to one entry, I have over double the entries of the first "You Make the Card," and that doesn't even count the ones from Japan. Why do I bring this up? Because the overflow of card submissions reminded me of a topic I meant to write about long ago. (As for "You Make The Card"... we're working on it... Hang in there...)

You see, in my job I am often called upon to judge the work of rookie card designers. I've seen enough that I began to recognize common mistakes. So, I thought it would make an interesting column to point out many of the novice mistakes made when designing **Magic** cards.

I should also note before I continue that my audience for this column is for card designers who want to design cards as we do here at Wizards of the Coast. If you want to do you own thing and do things we never would, more power to you, but this column isn't for you.



Mistake #1 - The Card Is Too Complicated

This is far and away, hands down, the most common mistake made by novice designers. I'm going to break it down as this problem shows up in several different ways:

The card has too many abilities - For some reason, new designers feel a great need to take all their cool ideas and put them on the same card. This is problematic for several reasons. First, it aesthetically makes the card look bad. I strongly urge designers to mock up stickers so they can get an idea of how the card looks. Cards with excessively long rules text look bad.

Second, the more abilities on the card, the more complicated the card gets. While this okay occasionally on a random funky rare, the average **Magic** card needs to be simple and straightforward. The best example of this is for you to think of the **Magic** cards you like. More often than not, the more popular cards are not in our tiniest font sizes.

Third, too many abilities "pull focus." In design lingo what this means is that it keeps the player from focusing on the aspect of the card you want them to focus on. If, for example, you have a neat new creature ability, you want the player to spend his energies thinking about that. Each other ability stuck on the card lessens that focus.

The card has too many flavor "add-ons" - This mistake is the adding of extra rules text that gives the card more flavor but complicates it as the condition seldom matters. As an example, imagine a Dragon that, In addition to its "normal" abilities, didn't untap whenever a Knight was in play. There's some flavor to the ability; maybe

the Dragon is afraid of Knights and "hides" from them, but it just isn't going to matter in the vast majority of the games. In addition, the ability is very swingy, meaning that once in a blue moon the card just gets randomly hosed.

As I talked about above, excess wordiness is bad. For that reason, a designer should not use "add-ons" unless they contribute enough to game play. A simple way to do this is keeping track of the abilities when you playtest the cards. If the ability never or very seldom comes up, it usually isn't worth the space on the card.

The card is too hard to understand - A very common response to reading a card file from a new designer is, "Huh?"

Quite often I'll have to read a card multiple times to understand what it does. And sometimes, I never figure it out. Good design leans towards simplicity not complexity. If the people you show your cards to consistently get confused by the same card, that's a sign that the card is too complicated. And don't jump in and explain your card. Good design has to rest on the laurels of the rules text. If the card can't explain itself, it's inherently flawed.

The card has too many memory issues -

As a general rule of thumb, cards that force a player to remember something are troublesome. That said, there is some valuable design space that requires memorization. The two biggest mistakes in this area are: One, cards that require a player to remember too many different things. And two, cards that require players to remember a detail unimportant enough that they are not constantly reminded. An enchantment where the opponent loses 3 life whenever he draws a card is memorable. One where he loses 1 life whenever a 1/1 creature comes into play is not.



Mistake #2 - The Abilities on the Card Have No Synergy

As I explained above, rookie designers love loading their cards with lots of abilities. Besides being overwhelming, it also hits another major design snafu, lack of synergy. You see, when I design a card, I think of it as a single entity. That means that everything on the card needs to be working together for the greater good of the card. Remember, every card doesn't need multiple abilities on it, but if you choose to use more than one, the abilities have to interconnect in some way.

For example, let's suppose I wanted to design a multi-color white and green creature. Also suppose I want to give it one white ability and one green ability. For the white ability, I choose first strike. Now, when I look to the green ability, I'm looking for something that has synergy with first strike. Let's walk through some choices:

Basilisk Ability (Destroy any creature damaged by this creature) - This ability has synergy because hitting first is extra valuable when you get to destroy the creature before it can hit back. (Note that the synergy works with the **newer template of the basilisk ability** and not the **older version** that happens at end of combat.)

Block fliers - This has reasonable synergy as both abilities are combat abilities.

Cannot be countered - The two abilities have nothing to do with one another. Cannot be countered is good against blue decks. First strike is sort of irrelevant against blue decks as traditionally blue has weak creatures to start with.

Regeneration - This ability is actually non-synergistic. The reason is that first strike is an ability which helps keep a creature alive in combat. As is regeneration. While the two have slightly different utility, they overlap enough that they aren't particularly interesting together. Alas, poor **Ranger en-Vec**.

Rootwalla ability (+X/+X once per turn) - This has synergy as an increase in power increases the strength of first strike.

Tap for mana - This is anti-synergistic as there is no easy way to make use of both abilities on the same turn. If you're tapping to attack and use the first strike, you can't get mana out of the card.

Trample - This one's kind of neutral. While there's no great synergy, it's not anti-synergistic. Also, we tend to put trample on big creatures and first strike on small and medium creatures.

Untargetability (Cannot be the target of spells or abilities) - This has a little synergy. First strike enhances a creature in combat and untargetability lessens a creature's chances of being destroyed outside of combat. Not the best fit, but okay.



As you can see, the higher the synergy, the better the overall card will feel.

Mistake #3 - The Card Ignores Basic Design Rules of Magic

This mistake plays into the major theme of "Making Magic": Respect the rules. Way too often when I'm looking at cards by a new designer, I see cards we simply would never make. The reason we haven't made much green creature kill or red enchantment destruction is not because it never dawned on us. It's because the game shouldn't have them.

Here are the major rule-breaking categories:

The Color Wheel - This is usually the biggest culprit. **Magic** colors are clearly defined. When you design a card that seems like a nice simple card that does something the color hasn't done before (or at least hasn't done since **Magic's** early days), think twice about why it hasn't been done yet. If it's a new, unexplored area, that's great. If it's an obvious mechanic that you've seen done in other colors, odds are you're about to make a mistake.

Card Type Rules - Each card type has certain rules about how it functions. Lands produce mana. Enchantments don't tap. Artifacts have generic mana costs. If your card breaks one of the fundamental rules of a card type (meaning that it does something that no card of that type ever does), ask yourself if the card shouldn't be of a different type.

General Flavor - Over the years **Magic** has built up a distinctive flavor. Some of this flavor has worked its way into card mechanics. These choices were made consciously, so be careful next time you design a card that flies in the face of history. Your non-flying male angel, for instance, might not be a perfect fit.

The point of this category is not that designers can't break rules. It's that rules shouldn't be broken if they don't need to be. As I'm fond of saying: Before you think outside the box, check inside the box first.

Mistake #4 - The Card Doesn't Work Within the Rules

To be clear, I'm not talking about cards that attack virgin areas of the rules. This mistake is about cards that simply don't work under the current existing rules. When you design a card, check with someone you know that's good with the rules. Make sure the card works the way you think it works.

Mistake #5 - The Card Is Undercosted, Overpowered or Simply "Bah-roken"

I understand that no one likes to make a weak card, but too often when looking at design files of new designers, I see cards that aren't in the right stratosphere of power. I listed this last because I think this is one of the least important design mistakes. (Lord knows I've made my share of crazy overpowered cards.) But, if you're serious about trying to design your own cards, I would recommend attempting to be somewhat close to reality. If this isn't something you're good at, use your friends that playtest the card. (Me, I just use the developers – "Hey Brian, cost this card for me.")

Making Your Own Magic


I hope this little tutorial has been helpful. That said, I need to stress that for legal reasons I do not read unsolicited card submissions sent to me in either my email or snail mail. While I'm excited to hear your feedback about today's article (and I do read everything sent to me - except, of course, unsolicited cards), please don't send me your card files.

Join me next week as we begin our *Scourge* previews and I talk about the thrill of designing the big boys.

Until then, may you have as much fun designing as I do.

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