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Making Magic Monday, June 2, 2003

Format Matters

Why there are many ways to play



Mark Rosewater

I know from my letters that many of you spend some of your workday reading **Magic**-related web sites. I do as well. The big difference is that it's part of my job.

My Boss: Rosewater? What are you doing?
Me: Uh, nothing. Just working.
My Boss: What's that on your screen?
Me: My screen?
My Boss: Is that a word processing program? Are you writing a business plan?
Me: It's not what you think.
My Boss: Not what I think? Have you even been on the Web today? What's the latest wacky Standard deck? What happened at the last prerelease? What *Mirrodin* cards have been leaked? What four letter words have you been called?
Me: I don't know.
My Boss: Have you surfed a single **Magic**-themed site today?
Me: No.
My Boss: Didn't we talk about this at your last review? You don't do any paperwork until you have thoroughly surfed the web. You understand me? I don't want you leaving this desk until you can tell me R&D's latest "crazy idea that will destroy the game".

One of the many perks of surfing the Web is that I come across topics that inspire columns. Today is just such a column. Over the last few months I noticed a number of posts that bemoan the fact that **Magic** is no longer a single game that is played uniformly by everyone. The proliferation of formats, they claim, has splintered players and turned **Magic** from one unified game into a bunch of smaller games.



This seemed like a perfect opportunity to examine the role of the various formats in **Magic**.

Formatter of Fact

So let's get to the heart of the matter. Why does **Magic** have formats? Why are there so many ways to play? The answer to these questions is pretty easy. There are so many ways to play **Magic** because it was designed by Richard Garfield to be modular and highly adaptable. People play **Magic** many different ways because it can be played many different ways.

That's not the interesting question. The question for this column is why does Wizards of the Coast support so many formats? Why don't we make everyone play one (or maybe just two or three) way(s)? Now that is an interesting question with an equally interesting series of answers. So without any further ado, here are the major reasons (in no particular order rather than the fancy of my mind) Wizards supports as many formats as we do:

#1 - It Allows a Wider Audience for the Game

One of **Magic**'s strengths is that it's many things to many people. As this is one of the major selling points of the game, Wizards has an obligation to do two things. First, we have to design cards for each of these different groups in every expansion. And second, we have to make sure

there are ways that these different cards can be played. To do this, we have to support various formats.

#2 - It Shapes the Game to Different Playing Needs

As an offshoot of the first point, different players have different playing needs. Some players only play once a month. Some players play with three other players. Some players just started buying card last week. By having different formats we enable each player to find the format that best fits their needs. Whether it be the ease of Sealed, the multi-player enabling of Two-headed Giant, or the small card pool of Block Constructed.



#3 - It Adds Variety to the Experience

Another thing that helps **Magic** stand out from other games is that it has a much greater variance in gameplay than most games. What this means is that players get tired at a much slower rate because **Magic** is less repetitive than most other games. Two games of **Magic** can be light years apart in how they play. But even **Magic** is not immune to repetition. Having various formats available is yet another avenue to let players shake up how their games are played.

#4 - It Makes More Cards Matter

As a card pool gets deeper, it becomes harder and harder for new cards to have an impact. The best example of this is Type I. With six thousand plus cards in the format, a new expansion is lucky to have a handful of cards that have any impact whatsoever (A quick bone to the Type I players out there - a number of cards in *Mirrodin* were designed with Type I in mind). This is a major reason why we support formats with smaller card pools (such as sealed, draft, Block Constructed, and Standard) that allow more cards to see play.

#5 - It Enhances Design Space

One of the joys of designing **Magic** is creating new environments for the players. In order to do this though, we have to be able to subtract things from the game. The proliferation of formats allows the designers the ability to create cards aimed for very specific environments. Limited formats, in particular, open up a large avenue to play with. To continue a theme of my column, restrictions breed creativity. Forcing players into different small boxes makes them have to think and react in very different ways. The designers are more challenged and the players get a much richer multiverse of worlds to play in.

#6 - It Challenges Players

As I've explained before ("[R&D R&R](#)"), R&D enjoys discussing all sorts of odd topics. One such topic: how long before Magic has its own Deep Blue (for those unfamiliar Deep Blue is a computer program that plays chess so well that it has managed to defeat the top human chess player - okay, only once I believe but still pretty impressive). And the answer we keep coming up with is a long, long time. Why? Well, first off, **Magic** has a much richer decision tree than chess. Second, **Magic** has a bluffing/mental element that would be lost on a computer. And third, excelling at **Magic** requires being good at numerous formats. **Magic's** strategic depth is yet another key selling point. Having a variety of formats only enriches this aspect of the game. Understand Standard? Great. Try your hand at drafting. Got that? How about a little Type I?

#7 - It Ensures a Healthy Metagame

Keeping an environment healthy is an ongoing challenge for R&D. Having multiple formats gives us a little bit of breathing room. If one format starts taking a nasty turn, players have other formats available to take up the slack.

#8 - It Sells Cards

Each of the above reasons adds value to the game. As such, it increases the value of each pack to the consumer. In short, players are happier buying packs if they feel they get more for their money. The end result is more sales for us. Why include this? Because I think it's important to be honest with all of you. R&D is very invested in making the game as good as it can be. Part of it is pride. Part of it is love for the game. But I don't want to insult your intelligence by avoiding the fact that part of it is that Wizards is in the business of selling cards. We want to make the game as attractive as possible because we all of you to want to buy more cards.

Formatters of the Heart

As you can see, having a variety of formats does much to enrich the game. Thus, the shorter answer to why we support so many formats is to make a better game for all of you.

Join me next week when I explore "top down" design.

Until then, may you dip your toe in a new format.

Mark Rosewater

"Extra Helpings" #1A 1/2

I've gotten a lot of mail asking where the Tom Swifties are. In addition, I've gotten even more mail asking where "You Make the Card II" has gone. The answers are actually tied together. You see, R&D is staffed for the average workload. This means that we get a little overworked when the top end rolls around. For the designers, that time is the late winter/early spring.

At one point, for example, I was on four design teams simultaneously, two of which I was running. On top of that, "You Make the Card II" was wildly successful. I received four times the amount of entries that I received from the first one (and that's with us limiting people to one mechanic). So the short answer is that I'm digging my way through them. (I've gotten help so the process has sped up some).


While I was excited to introduce "Extra Helpings" with the Tom Swifties, I did so prematurely as I don't feel it right to grade them until after I finish "You Make the Card". The Tom Swifties, incidentally, also far exceeded my expectations. I expected 100 to 200 replies. I got over 2000. So, I do plan on posting the Tom Swifties. But not until after I finish "You Make the Card". Which is chugging along and will hopefully be here soon for you to vote on.

I apologize for the delay and ask for just a little more patience. They're both coming. I swear.

Thanks,

Mark

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