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**Making Magic** Monday, July 14, 2003

# Let's Start at the Very Beginning

## Defining Qualities of an Entry Level Product



Mark Rosewater

As we continue our coverage of the Core Set (aka *Eighth Edition*), I thought I'd take this week to talk about a topic that, based on the many e-mails and posts I've read, seems commonly misunderstood. Most players realize that *Eighth Edition* is designed as an entry point for beginning players. But many do not seem to understand what exactly being an "entry point" entails. This week I thought I would talk about what qualities an entry level product, such as *Eighth Edition*, needs. To do this, I thought I'd point out some cards in *Eighth Edition* that serve this role and explain why we chose to put them into the set.

One last thing before I begin. I'm not using this column to explain why beginners are crucial to **Magic's** health. The reason being is that it seems pretty self-explanatory. Without them the game would wither and die. So if you care about **Magic's** long term health, you should care about it being accessible to new players.

### Grizzly Bears

In R&D-speak, this is a "vanilla" creature. Vanilla refers to the fact that it's a creature without any rules text. It merely has a power and a toughness. Many players complain that vanilla creatures are boring. Why waste the basic set with something so humdrum when much more exciting options are out there?

First, let me stress that vanilla creatures don't have to be boring. Savannah Lions, for example, is a vanilla creature and plenty of people seem excited that it's returning in Eighth. Vanilla creatures aren't inherently boring, they're just traditionally designed to be of an average to weak power level. Why? It's the nature of their design.

Let me explain. Let's say we want to design a tournament level vanilla 2/2. How do we do that? Can any color have a 2/2 for C ("C" is R&D-speak for a colored mana - so I'm asking if it could be done with a single mana of any of the five available colors)? As *Savannah Lion* is as high as we want to push the power level for a one-drop, I'd have to say no. Okay, let's go to two mana. Can we print a 2/2 for 1C? Of course, we have. It's called *Grizzly Bears* (or *Knight Errant* or *Fresh Volunteers* or *Glory Seeker*). But it's not tournament level. We can't cost something between C and 1C. That means that there is no way to cost a tournament level vanilla 2/2.



That explains why vanilla creatures tend to be weak. So, why do we have to include them in the basic set? To answer this question, I have to take you to the floor of a convention hall. (I sort of feel like the Ghost of Christmas Past.) Back around 1995. You see, I had just joined Wizards of the Coast. As I've explained in past columns, things were a bit looser back then. In addition, I was a single man with lots of time on my hands. As such, I had the opportunity to go to conventions. And when I use the term "conventions" I truly do mean the plural. In my first year at Wizards I traveled to every convention Wizards attended. And in those days, that was a lot.

Gaming conventions, comic conventions, book shows, trade shows, US nationals, foreign nationals. I was there. And the number one thing I did was demo **Magic**. You want to learn what

makes beginners tick? Teach people how to play. There is no single, more direct method to understand what confuses or excites a player who is just beginning.

You want to know the number one lesson I learned when teaching people how to play **Magic**? If you give people too much information, they shut down, stop listening to you and walk away never to play the game again. The best way to experience this (as a player) is to think about the feeling you have when you walk in on a sealed game in progress. When each player has ten plus permanents in play, it can be a little daunting figuring out what's going on. But the players of the game are okay, because they got to this complicated state a little at a time. Thus, they've been eased into the complexity. The same holds for beginners. To use a metaphor, you can't just throw them in the deep end of the pool and say "swim!". You have to start them in the shallow end of the pool and slowly move them towards the deep end.

This is why vanilla cards are so crucial. They help ease the beginner into the complexity of the game.

## The Lucky Charms



I've probably seen more griping about these cards than any other I'm going to talk about in today's column. I'm not exactly sure why. Probably because there's a cycle and there's nothing that seems to irritate players more than a cycle where all five cards suck. If one's good and four suck, players'll deal with it. But have five sucky ones and the pitchforks come out.

So, why are these cards in the basic set? What role do they serve? They actually do several things. Number one, beginners seem to really like them. It's important to have cards that excite beginners because we want the beginners to keep playing. Yes, I understand the cards aren't that good (although be careful - both **Iron Star** and **Wooden Sphere** did show up in a Worlds Top 8). It doesn't matter. I take that back. It does matter. But for a good reason. I'm getting ahead of myself. That's point number two. Let's stick to point number one.

Beginners like them. They get excited by them. Most importantly, they play them. But what about the experienced players? They don't like them. To be blunt, we don't care. Magic design and development is about making sure each group gets what they want. If Spike doesn't like Timmy's toys, it just really isn't something to lose sleep over. Spike isn't supposed to play with Timmy's toys (although he does on occasion). Now if Spike doesn't like Spike's toys, then we have a problem.

So why does the beginner like the lucky charms? It stems from a basic misunderstanding that most beginners go through. They overvalue life. Why? Because on the surface the game appears to be about life. The beginner recognizes that he can only lose the game if he loses all his life. Thus, he falsely assumes that gaining life is key to the game. This leads to point two.

The second reason Lucky Charms are good beginner cards is that they help teach beginners a fundamental aspect of the game. To win Magic you need to actively be out there creating threats rather than passively not losing. R&D cannot control how players pick up strategy, but creating bad cards that draw beginners in does help us ensure that they'll be steered towards some of the basics.

## Telepathy

What's the most exciting aspect of **Magic** for beginners?  
What is the key feature that tends to reel someone in?  
What turns beginners from interested spectators to passionate participants? As I said above, I've put a lot of

hours in teaching the game. And in my role as a designer, I have spent a great deal of time and energy understanding what makes players tick. So what is, pardon the pun, the magic ingredient?

Before I answer, I want to stress that there are many contributing factors. I think the flavor and the art do a lot to enrich the emotional impact of the game. I feel the basic mechanics of the game are extremely solid and provide a rich decision tree. But in the end, I think one quality dwarfs all others. **Magic** is a game that constantly breaks its own rules.

For the core gamers out there that were raised on Cosmic Encounter, this might not seem so revolutionary, but it is. You see, games have always been about the rules. The rules define the game. But in **Magic**, the game defines the rules. No matter what you've learned, at any moment a card could show up and tell you to do the opposite. This realization is what reels players in. In one shining moment, the world becomes limitless. This is the point where the journey of discovery begins.

As such, it's important to make sure that beginners get their hands on cards that drum this idea home. But remember, we don't want to scare them off with complexity. This means we need simple cards that break the rules. And we want to make sure that the flavor enforces why it makes sense that the rule can be broken. There has to be a logical reason why the rule is being broken. Telepathy is a perfect example.

The game says that players' hands are private. But here comes a card that says otherwise. Now you (and not your opponent) don't have to follow the rule. Why? Well, you have telepathy. You can read your opponent's mind. Okay, that makes sense.

Every new card teaches the beginners something about your game. R&D needs to make sure that those lessons are the ones that will increase the odds that the beginner wants to keep playing.

## Goblin King

Okay, you've gotten the beginner to understand that the game is a world of possibilities. What next? Now you need to hold his hand. A world of possibilities, while exciting, is a bit daunting. That's why the basic set also needs some cards that hit the beginner over the head. **Goblin King** is the perfect example.

When a beginner opens up **Goblin King** he discovers not just a single card but an entire deck. A deck that he can reasonably build. This is important. One of **Magic's** strengths is that it allows its user to define its parameters. You want to play a fast game that doesn't require too much thought, you can build a deck that lets you play that way. But to get beginners to the point where they understand this, we have to do a little bit of hand holding. Cards like **Goblin King** ease beginners into deck building in a fun, but not threatening, way.

## More Than Meets The Eye

As you can see, creating cards for beginners requires a very different mindframe. You can't just look at the card in a vacuum. You have to see what it says to the beginner about the game. What impact will it have the first time they see it? What strategies does it force them to think about? Does it comfort some inherent fear they bring to the game? All these different elements are key in turning a first time player into a lifelong player.

Join me next week as I continue my exploration of *Eighth Edition*.

Until then, may you learn to respect a card you do not like.




Mark Rosewater

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Mark may be reached at [makingmagic@wizards.com](mailto:makingmagic@wizards.com).

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