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Making Magic Monday, August 4, 2003

In the Bag



Mark Rosewater

Checkin' the email, checkin' the email...

One of the side effects of writing a weekly column is I get some mail. And by some mail I mean a lot of mail. And by a lot of mail I mean a *lot* of mail. The exact amount varies based on my chosen topic of the week and whatever random events are occurring in the game. Whenever I write about something controversial or some big piece of **Magic** news hits the public, my mailbox starts flooding.

Let me stress that I see this as a good thing. One of the most important parts of being a designer is understanding what the consumer wants. There's no better way to do this than to hear directly from them. This is why I read every letter sent to me. As I've stated many times, I do not have the time to respond to every letter, but I do in fact read every letter sent to me.

From time to time I like to use my column to dig into my mailbag and respond to some of the letters. I thought I'd begin with the topic most represented by my mail since my last mailbag column: the changing of the card faces. I got so much mail that it prompted a column, "[Frames of Reference](#)."

Mr. Rosewater,

I have been playing **Magic: The Gathering** since 1995. While I understand the need for a game to stay fresh and new to attract new players and keep it's business going, did things have to go this far?

The thing I have liked about **MTG** for quite some time is that it distinguished me from other CCG players. **Magic** has (had) an air of maturity and prestige in the design and presentation of the cards. The black borders [and] rustic feel to the design the lay out of the card itself gives (gave) **MTG** that mature identity.

Don't get me wrong, I still love the game play. But it just feels like **MTG** is hitting a mid-life crisis and trying to impress a new generation by going out and buying a metaphorical bright red sports car. The new design also lack the originality that the former magic cards relished in. Before, nothing else looked remotely like **MTG** cards. Now I might as well be playing *Yu-Gi-Oh!* or *Pokémon* with **Magic** art spliced in.

This is a plea, Mr. Rosewater. You have got to see what is happening to the face of a game that I know you to love and cherish. Stop this madness before it goes too far. Listen to your players. Don't turn **MTG** into a homogenous blob with the other CCG's out there! Be original! Don't change!

Sincerely and tearfully,

Joseph Hargett
Crestview Hills, Kentucky

Joseph,

Let me begin by stressing that I understand that the card frame change is a very emotional issue for a lot of players. Wizards is messing with something that strikes at the heart of the identity of the game: its appearance. This is not something we did lightly.

Change for the sake of change is bad. But resistance to change when change is necessary is equally problematic. As I talked about in my column, **Magic** has gone through a metamorphosis.

Many of the goals that went into designing the original card frames are no longer relevant. In addition, new goals that have become relevant weren't issues at the time.

As we see **Magic** as a classic game to last decades and hopefully centuries, it seemed foolish to keep a card frame that didn't have the functionality it needed. If we were going to change it, ten years was better than twenty or thirty. (For more details on this, please read the [column](#) on the topic.)

I can say that the changes were not done out of a desire to attract the *Pokémon/Yu-Gi-Oh!* crowd. **Magic** is the preeminent trading card game. If the kids playing those games grow up and are still interested in trading card games, they will naturally drift towards **Magic**. The changes in the card face were done for reasons of functionality. The reason they reflect some changes in other games is that those games approached their card faces with the knowledge of how trading card games were evolving. They made the logical decisions when trying to make their cards as functional as possible. Do we lose some flavor to achieve extra functionality? Yes, but we believe long term that it was a trade in the game's favor.

Instead of simply recapping my column, I wanted to touch upon a few things now that the card frames are out in the public's hands. First, the feedback has been very positive. The majority of players who have expressed their opinion (to me) after seeing *Eighth Edition* cards like the new card frames (although as Randy pointed out around the office, this majority seems to think that they're the minority). And the new foils, one of the impetuses for the change, seem to be universally beloved.

All I ask is that you give the new card frames a chance. They might seem odd at first (change is often disorienting), but I believe with time, you will come to appreciate how they compliment the gameplay.

It's also important to note that not all my mail on the topic was negative:

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I recognized the mob-mentality going around looking to lynch you for the new changes in Magic's design. I think it's unfortunate that the unhappy are always more vocal than the happy. I guess a greased wheel makes no squeaks. :)
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Anyway, for what it's worth, I think the new designs look great. And you are right; 5 years from now the majority will agree with you. Not that you'll hear from them at that point saying so...
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Greg Lott
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Greg,

Every Monday when I come in I check the thread to my column and then I read my email. The thread is always more critical of me, R&D, and the company as a whole than the emails are. For some reason people are more uncomfortable saying nice things in public than saying not-so-nice things.

So for all for all of you players out there that are happy with the way things are, I do read your emails and your voice is not lost. I understand that the state of **Magic** is not the doom and gloom that message board threads sometimes make it seem like.

The next largest issue? A mistake I made in an aside in my column on the design of **Phage** ("[Phage Against the Machine](#)").

```
Your trick with Phage in Aside #19 doesn't work. Kamahl's ability doesn't deal combat damage, Phage only kills people with combat damage. (And you designed this card?)
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--Jeff Vondruska  
DCI Level 2 Judge
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Jeff,

I got a surprising amount of mail on this issue. My lesson from this is that I should try to consciously make more mistakes because you all seem to love telling me about it. Just kidding.

Okay, let's address this particular mistake. And yes, it was a mistake. So how did it happen? How did I, Mark Rosewater, make a mistake?

As a quick aside, I've noticed that sarcasm tends to get lost easily in print. The last line was sarcasm. I make mistakes in my columns all the time. And if you want to see me in my mistake-making prime check out my trivia column on Sideboard.com ("[Question Mark](#)"). I average a mistake about once every other week. And these are just the mistakes my editors don't catch. Anyway, one last time, sarcasm.

While working on the Phage article, Elaine Chase (an R&D member on the rules team) mentioned a neat trick with [Volrath's Shapeshifter](#) and Kamahl. After hearing the trick, I asked if Phage was "damage" or "combat damage." Elaine said it was the first. Now, when I designed the card I made it damage and not combat damage thinking there might be neat tricks like the Kamahl one that players could do. But the development team found it broken and changed it.

It was my responsibility after Elaine told me the trick to actually go look at the card, but I didn't. So, I'm not blaming Elaine. I needed to do my homework. The mistake rests clearly on my shoulders.

After Aaron discovered the mistake (he too got letters), he changed the example to one that worked, using [Rorix](#) instead of [Kamahl](#). I then got a number of letters that complained that we changed the mistake without noting that we changed it. The reason we don't label corrections is twofold. First, we want MagicTheGathering.com to look at professional as possible. If we see a problem, we fix it. We don't leave it for some historical context. Second, explanations of corrections tend to confuse readers. To understand why we had to change the example would have required far more wording than was worth it.

In summary, mistakes happen because it's hard to put together a daily website and mistakes happen. It was fixed because we want our site to be as good as possible, so we fix mistakes when we catch them.

Another common topic was my column on why R&D makes bad cards ("[When Cards Go Bad](#)"). I routinely get e-mail on this column even though it was published about fourteen months ago. (Although to be fair it was reprinted last December during our best-of week.)

Sir,

I just read your articles, "When Good Cards Go Bad" and "Rare But Well-Done."

Thank you for writing them, they do help clear up the issue, but you are still somewhat missing the point of both writers' question:

Why make bad rares? You have explained the need for "bad" cards; I understand and accept your reasoning. However, that doesn't explain why you must make some of them rares.

You are correct in your argument that making all "good" cards rares would drive up their value, but you seem to be confusing two separate situations.

All rares can be "good" without all "good" cards being rare. You can still spread some (presumably lower-power) "good" cards amongst the commons and uncommons.

If you made all rares fit into one of your "good" categories (to others, to beginners, in certain formats, etc) then at least we'd have a chance of finding another player who wants and would trade for/buy it. As it is, we must find a collector who doesn't have that card yet or eat it.

Let me say I'm not a **Magic** player, and I don't know a Shadowmage Infiltrator from an Oath of Mages, but I do know that I feel ripped off when I open a pack of trading cards and get a worthless rare. I'm sure every *Pokémon* player who's opened a pack to find a Misty's Goldeen or Lt. Surge's Secret Plan as their rare would agree with me. As you can probably guess, I was referred to your articles by WotC's *Pokémon* side of the house.

Thanks for your time and attention,

--Dan King

Dan,

I don't think a week goes by that I don't get a letter in response to my bad cards article ("[When Cards Go Bad](#)"). Many of which respond to the "bad" rare issue. So much so that I wrote the

second column you mention ("[Rare But Well Done](#)") talking about how we choose card rarity. But still I get letters like yours. So, I thought it was time to give the blunt answer.

Why do we make bad rares? Because it's a physical impossibility to not make bad rares. They have to exist. There is no way to keep them from existing. As I explained in my bad card column, we can only make so many good cards and still keep the power level from creeping. A large expansion has 110 rares (soon to be 88 – see Randy's column "[The Size of Sets](#)" for the explanation). There aren't 110 good cards in a large expansion. Even if we put every good card in rare (which would cause all sorts of other complaints), by simple math, there has to be bad cards in rare. Add to that problem that "good" is subjective to begin with meaning that very few cards are seen as "good" by all types of players, and you can see that eliminating bad rares is simply an impossibility.

Sometimes the response letters to "[When Cards Go Bad](#)" leads in some odd directions.

Hi Mark.

I read your "When cards go bad" column and you state that R&D makes cards for a variety of different players.

Quote:

A good chunk of cards are designed to be used in Limited (both sealed and draft).

Other cards are made with Block Constructed in mind.

Still others are designed with older formats (Extended, Type 1, etc.).

My question is, why aren't you supporting the ante-players anymore? I'm sure there are some players who prefer playing with an ante, but to my knowledge R&D hasn't made an ante-card since Jeweled Bird or Contract from Below.

Fredrik Andresen - Fredrikstad, Norway

Fredrik,

The last ante card was actually *Homelands' Timmerian Fiends*. Why did we stop making them? To be blunt, (I seem to be in a blunt mood today) because the majority of the players hated ante. You see, when **Magic** first began, playing for ante was the default. If you didn't want to play for ante, you had to specifically state the fact at the beginning of the game. It became apparent pretty quickly that a very small percentage of players were playing for ante.

So, Wizards changed the rules to make non-ante games the default and ante games a variant. But we continued to make ante cards. Our research showed that players hated the ante cards. Why? Because the vast majority of them never played ante they saw an ante card as a dead card. But we make plenty of cards for some other small segments of our audience, so why not let the ante players have their ante cards?

The answer is a psychological one. When we design a card for multiplayer play (such as *Syphon Mind*), for example, it still is useable in other formats and variants. You might play the card in limited. Perhaps you have a deck that somehow makes it useful in a two-player game. The card has potential, so players are willing to leave it be. But with ante cards, non-ante players realize that it's a card they can never play. Thus, opening one makes them very angry.

In the end, ante cards made a small (and trust me, its very small) group of players happy and actively upset a large majority of the players. While we like to make cards for as many different player segments as we can, we draw the line when the inclusion for a small minority upsets the larger majority. Ante cards were one such case. Why don't we make ante cards anymore? Because the player base has spoken up and said they don't want them.

What would a mailbag column be without a "How can I get your job?" letter?

In a recent [interview](#) with Ray Moore for Brainburst.com you stated that to become a designer for the R&D team at WotC it was best to be on the Pro Tour or have some sort of experience at a pro level. My question to you is, is there any other way to be considered for a place in R&D? Does work experience or education count? Also is the R&D team based in Seattle? A reply would be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,
Donovan Insley

Donovan,

There are two paths that I believe are most likely to lead to a job in R&D (and again, let me stress that R&D jobs don't become available all that often). First, is the Pro Tour path. Get R&D to notice you by showing off your playing skills. Part of being a good developer is the ability to recognize broken cards and to be able to build decks that demonstrate why the card is a problem. Top level players have proven to have this skill in spades.

But there is a second path. The other way to get noticed by R&D is become an observer of the game. Become an online writer that takes the time to give players an insight on the game. This doesn't simply have to be strategic articles. Show us through your writing that you have a grasp of how the game ticks. If we like the way your mind works, you'll get on R&D's radar. In order for this to happen though, you need to make a name for yourself. You need to produce a depth of material that shows us that you can look at many facets of the game.

In short, if you want to get on the short list for job openings, you have to draw attention to yourself. This could be by winning or by writing, but it requires you taking effort to demonstrate one way or another that you understand how the game works.

As not to leave you empty handed, it just so happens that there are a number of interesting positions currently open including an R&D intern position, a **Magic** editor position, and a slot on the **Magic** brand team. If you'd like to read more about them, click [here](#).

The next letter was in response to my column on the flavor of white ("[The Great White Way](#)").

Hi.

This is a picky philosophy major email; I love what you do with the game.

"I'd like to make a quick aside about white and the concept of 'good.' Good and evil are labels used by people to signify whether something promotes their values or attacks their values. Something that promotes the values you believe in is good. Something that attacks the values you believe in is evil."

I don't think this is complete. Good and evil have socially constructed meanings. Take Bob. Bob enjoys torturing little kids. In Bob's value system is "It's ok for me to hurt people so I can have fun" but he also is a reasonable man, a student of society, and would concede that any sensible observer would describe this value as "evil". Bob doesn't believe that his actions are morally necessary, that is to say he wouldn't go out and try and convince others to do the same thing, or suggest they should be coerced to act this way, which Bob would do if he believed he was doing good. Moreover, some people who do "evil" things do them because they believe they are evil, because it gives them a kick to go against society. If they believed they were doing good, they wouldn't act that way at all. I'm all for moral relativism, or whatever, but "good" and "evil" act as ideas with a lot more societal weight than our individual value systems. Although the people who do "evil" things while believing they do good do exist (and we generally label them insane), they are a fairly small percentage of evildoers, most of whom either want something enough to make evil worth it, or just don't care, or live for the guilt (see Catholicism). When the evil in the name of good thing happens, as with fascism, it typically happens as a social movement, a change in group values.

There's plenty more to be said on this topic, but it's not remotely relevant to your article on white (although it may be to your article on black, which I don't believe really "sees itself as good"...)

Cheers

Jamie (--- likes to send tangential email

Jamie,

Commonly when I write about a topic, I get email from someone who knows a lot more about the topic than I do. Such is the case here. What I was trying to get to was that the terms "good" and "evil" are subjective. No color is by definition good or evil. Rather every color has the potential to do either. That said, from a human perspective, white is more likely to do good than black. But by no means is it an absolute.

The column the generated the most positive feedback was my choose your own adventure as a member of R&D ("[A Day in the Life](#)").

Mark,

Again, normally I wouldn't email you to just tell you how good of a job you are doing. (Don't you have a million other fans to do that?) But your Choose Your Own Adventure article was just as much fun as playing **Magic** itself.

I just got done watching *AntiTrust* (the movie) again and thought to myself how much this must be like it is working for Hasbro and Wizards of the Coast.

Your article pretty much told the tale.

Gosh it was good. I'm going to run through it again. ;) Hope your bandwidth can handle all of us doing the same.

Until then, may your fans emails be as witty as the articles that inspire them.

Jonathan Sudduth,
Stockbridge, GA

Jonathan,

I was very proud of this column. My fellow co-workers found it even funnier as it was "more truthful than the public will ever know."

Good morning, Mark,

I've just read your latest article and what can I say... BRILLIANT!

Funny, humorous, insightful. It really does have it all. Plus there are some good lessons to be learned (I will never work late again!)

.

Keep up the good work.

Cheers
Jonathan Hammond

Jonathan,

I think I need to get more readers named Jonathan. But seriously, positive letters like this mean a lot to me. One of the reasons I like this gig is I have the ability to hear directly from the public. So when I do something right (and trust me I hear when I do something wrong), it's nice to hear it.

Another common question is posed in the many "Why **Coral Eel**?" letters.

In your recent article "[Small Change](#)," you say that Merfolk were eliminated because sea-creatures made little sense in **Magic**. Why then, what Coral Eel put in place? Last time I checked, Eels weren't so hot on land either.

Jonah Palmer

Jonah,

I got a lot of letters asking this very question. The answer is that change takes time. We wanted a 🧜♂️ 2/1 vanilla creature for the basic set. We had two choices, **Coral Merfolk** and **Coral Eel**. Neither fit our new "makes sense fighting on land" philosophy. So, we made the decision to purge the Merfolk on this pass and fix the problem before *Ninth Edition*. So to all you **Coral Eel** and **Giant Octopus** lovers, you're forewarned. Their time is almost up.

And finally, a letter on an issue that I get from time to time.

Hi,

In a vein similar to *Selecting Eighth Edition* and *You Make the Card*, but obviously much grander and more difficult, I think it would be interesting if you had a set comprised completely or mostly of player

created cards... say, one submission per DCI number. What do you think?

Richard Wysong

Richard,

This idea gets suggested from time to time. Here are the major reasons it hasn't happened:

- Good design isn't about creating randomly interesting cards. Good design is about synergy. Good design is about creating cards that are designed to interact with one another. Design has a very important holistic quality that would be missed if each card was designed by a different person.
- A design requires many different types of cards. There is no way to ensure that the public turns in cards for all the different niches we need to fill. If "You Make the Card" is any indication, I would expect to get a boatload of rares and very few commons.
- To properly design a set, you have to understand the context of when the set is going to come out. As we are not willing to publicly announce our card sets for the next two years, the public would have to design blind not knowing what kind of environment they would be creating cards for.
- The logistics of such a project would be huge, far more time intensive than a traditional design team.

In short, a player designed set would be very hard to execute and we don't feel we would end up with a set at the overall quality level (of the whole set, not just individual cards) we expect of a **Magic** set.

Bend Away

That's all the mail for today. Before I wrap up this column I want to remind you once again that one of the perks of this column is that I let anyone in the **Magic** community who wants to bend my ear. If you have any issues that you want communicated to someone high up that has a large influence on the game, here you go. I will read every letter sent to me. I don't have the time to respond to most of the letters, but I do, I swear, read every letter sent to me. The ones that strike me often get shared with other R&D members.


You have a voice. You. You sitting right there reading this column. You have the ability to affect the game you love. If you care about some issue, positively or negatively, let me know. I can only respond to the voices I hear.

Join me next week, when I start talking up a blue streak.

Until then, may you make your voice heard.

Mark Rosewater

Mark may be reached at makingmagic@wizards.com.

Discuss this article on the [message boards](#). 

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