



MAGICTHEGATHERING.COM

ARTICLES

Related links

Read other articles

TOURNAMENTS

MAGIC ONLINE

Article Search

The Value of Pie



Maintaining the identity of colors

Mark Rosewater · Making Magic
Monday, August 18, 2003

Last week I wrote about the role of blue in the color pie (["True Blue"](#)). Whenever I write an article such as this (["It's Not Easy Being Green,"](#) ["The Great White Way,"](#) etc.), I get feedback from a number of players that essentially says, "Enough with the color pie. R&D's obsession with putting everything in its own tiny box is ruining the game."

Here's the interesting part. I believe the color pie is the heart of the game. I think it's at the core of what makes **Magic** tick. That's as far from "ruining the game" as you can get. So I thought I'd dedicate my column today to explaining in detail why the color pie is so important. Hopefully, this will allow many of you to see it with the same appreciation I do.



The infamous Color Pie.

Let's get to it. What's so great about the color pie?

#1 - It Creates Restrictions

I started with this one because I think many of the color pie's detractors consider the restrictions created by the color pie to one of the biggest strikes against it. After all, restrictions keep players from doing the things they want. That's bad, right? Well, not to a game designer. You see, it's our job to make your life difficult.

Let me explain. To design a good game, you need to understand why your target audience wants to play. And then you have to design your game to match that objective. **Magic** is a strategy game. The goal of a strategy game is to mentally challenge the players. So how do we do that? We start by setting up a clear goal and then we throw obstacles in your way. (For those of you that care, if you replace "player" with "protagonist" this is the same way writers form a story.)

Overcoming obstacles is the joy of strategy gaming. ("Oh my god, he got me down to one life and he had four creatures in play and all I had was a single mountain." "So, you lost?" "No, I won. You're not going to believe how it happened.") Thus, restrictions while frustrating short term, are critical to happiness long term.

"But wait a minute," many of you are saying, "I have an opponent. He's the obstacle. I don't need the game getting in my way." I would argue that you do. Strategy gamers want to be mentally challenged. To do that, the game designers have to make problem-solving hard. Otherwise there isn't enough challenge. A key element to accomplishing this is to limit the tools available to solve the task.

To explain, let me pull a story from my life. My sophomore year in college I joined the student government of my dorm. As such, I was expected to participate in numerous "spirit-building" activities. One such activity was building a dorm float for the homecoming parade. Now, the dorm government wasn't all that thrilled with the idea so they put very little money towards the project. A

hundred dollars if I remember correctly. Other dorms were spending over a thousand dollars. We had a hundred.

I showed up around nine o'clock (the floats were built during an all-nighter the night before the big game) to discover that the entire team was six people. Most other floats had fifty or more people working on them. We had twelve hours, an eighth of the people and a tenth of the money to build a float. So we lost? No, we won, and you're not going to believe how it happened. Somehow during the night we came up with a unique idea that played into our lack of resources. We found inventive ways to aid in our building and pieced together a rather impressive float. I had a blast.

When I showed up the next year, I discovered that our dorm had joined forces with another dorm. As such we poured tons of money and people into the project. We had every resource at our fingertips. You know what? I hated it. I'm a strategy gamer. I don't want everything just given to me. I want to earn my victories.

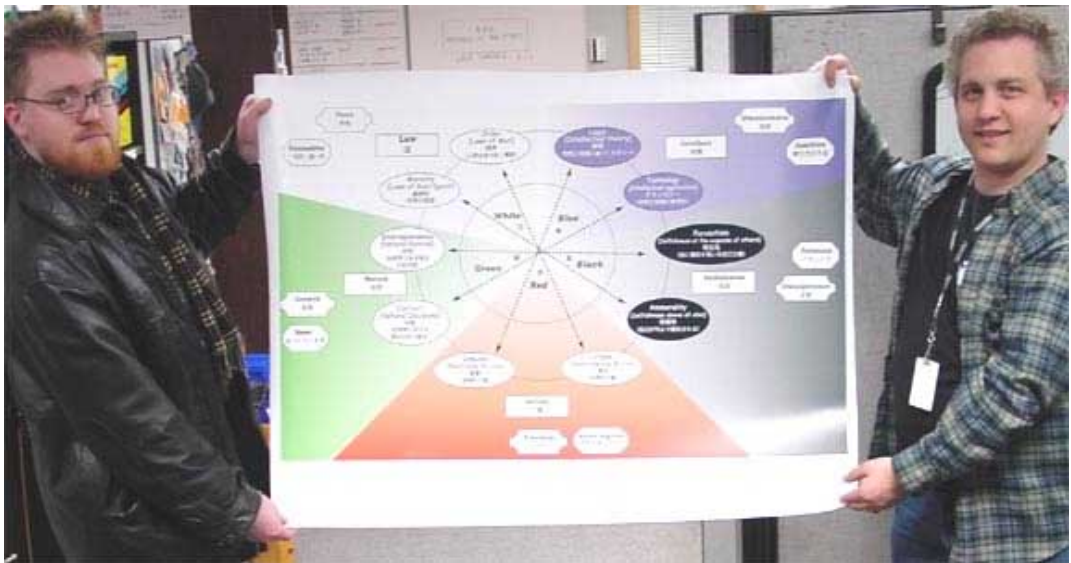
This is why the color pie is so important. As a game designer, I want to make the players earn their victories. The game simply wouldn't be as fun if every color had access to every effect. Each color has built in weaknesses that the opponent can exploit. But that doesn't mean you can't find creative solutions. In fact, finding creative solutions is what **Magic** is all about.

#2 – It Defines Flavor

R&D hates flavor... or so the myth goes. I think this myth comes from a few articles where I talked about R&D siding with function when it and flavor clashed. From that, some players jumped to the conclusion that R&D finds function more important. I guess hating flavor is then only a hop, skip and a jump away.

R&D doesn't hate flavor. In fact, I think the color pie is proof of how much R&D appreciates flavor. As I said above, I believe the color pie is at the core of the game. And the color pie is an example of a case where flavor trumps function. It's actually a bit more severe than that. In the color pie, flavor dictates function. Flavor tells function what it can and cannot do.

This is one of the most important roles of the color pie. It clarifies each color's philosophy and then extends them to the game by bending mechanics around it. One of the reasons that the colors are so rich in **Magic** is that they extend to every aspect of the game.



The Color Wheel is a chart that explains the flavor and conflicts of each color, and it may or may not be synonymous with the Color Pie. It's all very confusing. And no, we have never put a large version of this document up on the web.

#3 – It Creates Game Balance

Another important goal of the game designer (and more importantly the game developer) is to keep the game balanced. One of the defining qualities of **Magic** deck design is that no strategy is unbeatable. Every archetype has its weakness. If a player knows what his opponent is playing, he should be able to defeat it.

What does this have to do with the color pie? Quite a bit, actually. You see, in order for every deck to be beatable it has to have a weakness. This is where the color pie comes in. The color pie not only tells colors what they can do, it also tells them what they cannot. This built-in weakness into each color is core to the game. Each color, for example, has a certain card type that it cannot easily deal with. (Blue is an odd case since it can deal with any spell but has no ability to destroy permanents.)

In addition, each color has a certain style of play that causes it problems. Red, for example, has no long-term card advantage. It has strengths in the early game but tends to run out of gas in the later game. Once again, the designers and developers harness weakness as a tool to craft the game. No color can run amok because the game has built-in safety features. In fact, the times that R&D has had the greatest problems is when we allow colors to get access to things they're not supposed to have. When R&D doesn't respect the color pie in always comes back to bite us.

#4 – It Adds Personality

Normally I make my case by talking about the topic. For a change, I thought it might be nice to show you what I mean. You want to experience a world without a color pie? Here's what you do. Build some decks with the following assumption: all basic lands produce any color of mana. This will give you a glimpse into a pie-less world. Go play a whole bunch of games and come back. Don't worry, I'll wait.

Back already? Well, how were the games? At first, they're fun because you're doing something new that you don't normally get to do. But after a while it becomes a little monotonous. Why? First, card variety goes down as each deck just uses the most efficient card available. Soon deck archetypes start collapsing together. There is no white weenie or green "Stompy" deck, just a speed creature deck. Next, the decks start to seem less connected because the cards in them don't have any common theme. What you end up with is a few, very efficient but flavorless decks. You have efficiency at the sake of personality.

At its heart that is the most important part of the color pie. Yes, **Magic** could be played with one color, but it would be less of a game. Having five colors means that each color has to have its own personality. For that to happen, the colors need a distinct feel both in how the cards look and sound and in how the cards play.

Too often, I think people see the color pie as a tool to lessen what the colors can do. I see the color pie as a tool that highlights what each color represents. It doesn't detract but rather adds to the value of the colors. The more different black is from green, the better. I don't want colors that are all subtle shades of one another. I want colors that are blaringly unique in what they represent. This is what the color pie adds to the game.

Bye Bye, American Pie

As you can see, I'm very passionate about the color pie. I believe **Magic** owes much of its uniqueness to it. Hopefully, my column today gave you a better insight into R&D's dedication to it. As you can see, there is much more to it than one might see at first glance.

Join me next week when I introduce some unique individuals.

Until then, may you know the importance of being different.

Mark Rosewater

Mark may be reached at makingmagic@wizards.com.

Interact

Rant, rave and share



[Discuss "The Value of Pie"](#) on the message boards



[Respond to Mark Rosewater](#) via email

Consult

More articles by Mark Rosewater



[Unhinged or No?](#) The answer you've been waiting for

Continue

Other recent articles



[Inside "You Decide!"](#) Behind the scenes plus the voting results
Scott Johns

Today



[Unhinged or No?](#) The answer you've been waiting for
Mark Rosewater

Today



[Power vs. Reliability](#) Analysis of last week's poll
Scott Wills

Today

Today



[Ach! Hans, run! It's the sneaky people from magicthegathering.com!](#) So...?

3 days ago



[Ach! Hans, run! It's Unhinged!](#) Has the hiatus ended?

4 days ago



[Say What](#) Answers from the "Talk to Me" poll

7 days ago

- All [Mark Rosewater](#) articles



[Saturday School #72](#) Thundercloud Elemental and Pristine Angel
Rune Horvik

2 days ago



[As They Were](#) A look at four Darksteel cards
Aaron Forsythe

3 days ago

- [More recent articles](#)

- [Return to Magicthegathering.com](#)

[WHAT'S NEW](#) [CORPORATE INFO](#) [WHERE TO BUY](#) [INTERNATIONAL](#) [SUPPORT](#) [SITEMAP](#) [PRODUCTS](#)

© 1995-2004 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
[Wizards is headquartered in Renton, Washington, PO Box 707, Renton, WA 98057.](#)
[PRIVACY STATEMENT](#)