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Afraid So



A story filled with dread and terror

Mark Rosewater · Making Magic
Monday, October 27, 2003

I'm glad you all could join me for tale tonight. For it is a story filled with dread and terror. A story I shall call -

A Grave Mistake

There once was a young card designer named Mark. One day, he was tasked with the job of leading the design on a large expansion of a popular trading card game. This game was very important to his company so Mark felt great pressure to make the expansion as good as he could. Mark was a fan of the creative process. Although he was under some strain to do good work, he enjoyed the task.

But the clock was constantly ticking. Mark and his team worked feverishly to create the cards needed for the set. Time was almost up, yet there were still a few holes. Mostly at rare. Mark realized that in order to finish, the team was going to have to step up its production of new cards. This meant venturing out into virgin design territory. The team would have to create cards in areas never touched by previous designers.

Now, Mark was a fan of synergy. He felt it was very important for cards in a set to have some relevance to one another. As such, he sought to create synergy wherever appropriate. It came down to the one fateful night. You see, the set was due the next day and Mark still had a hole left to fill. If he failed in his task, the set would be incomplete.

Only a single florescent light illuminated Mark's desk as he sat in front of his computer. He had been there for hours and was quite tired. Every idea he came up with seemed too similar to another card already in the set. But then it hit him. The expansion very much forced the player into dealing with certain key parameters. Because of this, the players were evaluating situations in very untraditional ways.

Mark hit upon an idea. What if he created a card that punished a common means to take advantage of the set's theme? And what if he made it an instant so that the opponent wouldn't see it coming? Just as the light bulb was turning on above his head, the real lights turned off.

It's now a little over a year later. We're at a game store. A young man named Timothy walks in. Timothy plays the game that Mark works on. He has been playing for a little over two years. But money is tight, so Timothy is only able to pick up a booster pack every other week or so. Today is one of those days.

Timothy walks to the counter of the store and asks for a single pack of the latest expansion. As soon as the transaction is completed Timothy rips opens his booster pack with a wild gleam in his eye. First, he checks out his commons. The set has been out long enough and Timothy has purchased enough packs that none of the commons are unfamiliar to him.

Next he moves onto the uncommons. He doesn't have two of the three but neither particularly match his style of play. The only thing remaining is for Timothy to look at his rare. A superstitious game player, Timothy slowly slides the rare from behind the uncommon. He looks at the card and a blood-curdling scream comes from his mouth. He sees...





Hello everyone. I hope I didn't scare you too badly. Remember, it's a story. Just a story. Anyway, welcome to the *Halloween Special* here at **MagictheGathering.com**. This week will be dedicated to the creepy and the crawly side of **Magic**. And if we have time, perhaps a few of the things that go bump in the night.

Scare Tactics

The interesting question for this column is what am I doing for the Halloween Special? I'll be honest, when Daniel Stahl told us the theme (Daniel's filling in until we get a replacement for Aaron), I was a little taken aback. How exactly does Halloween and **Magic** card design intersect? For those science buffs out there, I couldn't picture the Venn diagram.

But then it dawned on me. In one way, card designers have the same role as ghosts or werewolves or vampires. Our job is to scare you. Huh? Wasn't our job to make cool cards that are fun to play? Where did the scare tactics come from? Today, I hope to show you design in a whole new light. You often see our Dr. Jeckyl. As it's Halloween, it only seems fair to show you our Mr. Hyde.

To Boldly Go Where No Man Has Gone Before

To explain this role of designer as spook, let me start by filling you in on a common creative roadblock. (Once again, for those of you out there that care at all about reading a great book on creative thinking, I cannot recommend Roger von Oech's "A Whack on the Side of the Head" strongly enough.) I'll call this phenomenon creative glut.

Here's how creative glut works. Someone creates something revolutionary. People flock to it. People fall in love with it. It becomes part of their lives. And then slowly over time, people become comfortable with it. (The comfortable part is key, by the way.) This puts the creator in an awkward place. Although the concept drew people to the idea in the beginning, it's the execution that people remember. In English, this means that a successful creative endeavor becomes connected not to the revolutionary idea that spurned it but rather to the mundane choices that were made to execute it.

You see, humans by nature are attracted to consistency. We like things we understand. We enjoy being around things that are comfortable. So when we find something new we like, we are resistant to see it change. We know we like it the way it is, so why risk altering it? This means that when the creator returns to further innovate, he is heavily influenced to make similar choices to the ones he made before. The end result of creative glut is that innovation slowly winds down. Little by little, choices are locked into place.

If, And & Glut

What does this have to do with **Magic**? Everything. **Magic** is a creative endeavor. Thus, it is susceptible to creative glut. In fact, one of R&D's key roles is to keep creative glut from overrunning the game. This is where the scary part comes in.

The revolutionary part of **Magic** was the very concept of a trading card game. In Richard Garfield's vision, trading card games were games that were bigger than the box. They were games that required exploration to learn what all the pieces of the game were. And, most importantly, new pieces were constantly added to keep the game from ever stagnating strategically.

It was this concept that first drew people to the game. The reason **Magic** was unlike other games was due greatly to this innovation. To execute his vision, Richard had to make choices. Some like the color wheel or the land resource management (play lands to play spells) were carefully thought out and are key to the game. Others decisions were chosen to maximize the flavor of certain cards in Alpha. Richard did not intend for the decisions to be anything more than a one-time decision on one random card.

The problem, though, is that the player base followed the same pattern I outlined above. They were attracted by the innovation (and, to be fair, the good execution). They fell in love with the game. And over time, they became comfortable. Decisions Richard made solely to maximize the flavor of a single card became precedent.

This is best symbolized by **Prodigal Sorcerer** (aka Tim). **Prodigal Sorcerer** is a cool card oozing with flavor. But it makes no sense in any larger understanding of the color wheel. Blue is the antithesis of direct damage. Having a creature that can poke things makes no sense in blue. Yet, **Magic** had blue "Tims" for almost eight years. Why? Creative glut. A decision made years ago gets carried on even though it flies in the face of the rest of the game.



"To Fill The Cup, Once Must First Empty It"

Clearing the creative glut is just the first of R&D's unpopular tasks. The second is creating space for new innovation. In my article on why bad cards exist ("[When Cards Go Bad](#)"), I explain that bad cards not only *should* exist, but by the nature of design they *have* to exist. They simply can't not exist. (How's that for a double negative?)

The idea behind this concept is that any one space of **Magic** design can only hold so much content. Otherwise, the game becomes so cumbersome that it falls in on itself and becomes unfun to play. The simple way to imagine this is to imagine that every card is a split card (even permanents), every card has two completely different functions. If you think about this, you'll see how the insane decision tree would bring games to a screeching halt.

As design space is a resource (one that we generally maximize), this means that anytime we add something, we need to take something else away. In general players don't like when we take something they like away. But without it, there's simply no room for new cool things. The majority of this shifting is taken care by the rotation policy, but R&D still has the ongoing task of stripping away different aspects of the game (everything from single cards to whole mechanics).

Boo!

People like comfort. Losing comfortable things is scary. One of R&D's jobs is to take away comfortable things. We're also responsible for putting players in unfamiliar territory. This too is scary. People by nature don't like being put in a place they don't know. But to make **Magic** a better game, R&D wants to force players into areas of the game they've previously avoided (think graveyard as resource or tribal as recent examples). This forces new exploration and new strategic thinking.

The flip side of this is that R&D gets to sometimes undo what it does. Old cards that have been rotated out can reappear in new sets. Areas of the game that were popular can be revisited. Anything we take away can later be given back.

The point though of this article is that R&D isn't too far removed from **Frankenstein's Monster**. If we're doing our job correctly, we need to occasionally make all of you uncomfortable. We need to take away your safety blankets and force you to get lost. We need to push you out of the warmth of the light into the coldness of the dark. We need to scare you.

Monsters Among Us

So, you see, during this Halloween Special, not all the monsters in **Magic** are cards in the game. Sometimes it's R&D's job to play the role of monster. We might shock you. We might surprise you. We might even make you scream. Just be aware that do so for reasons a little different than eternal hunger or a pesky need for fresh brains.

Join me next week when I look at early (and I mean early) *Mirrodin* design.

Until then, may you sometimes find yourself down the unexplored path.

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