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# Make No Mistake

## A Short History of Magic Mess-ups



Mark Rosewater · Making Magic  
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*The greatest mistake is not admitting when you make one.*  
- Winston Churchill

Mistakes get a bum rap. In life (especially in creative areas like card design - see, this is relevant), success does not breed education. Failure does. Because when things are going your way, you aren't all that receptive to feedback. But when you're suffering the agony of defeat, you have a little more motivation to figure out what went wrong. So why do I bring mistakes up? Because today I thought it might be fun to take a look at **Magic's** long history to see some of the game's classic mistakes and to discuss what we've learned as a result.

In addition, I have a little bonus for all you home viewers. I've noticed that the mistakes in my columns tend to generate more mail than any other topic, so today, in honor of my column on mistakes, I've hidden 20 mistakes for you all to find. (And as always, be warned that a few of them are very sneaky.) Check back next week for a complete list of my blunders. Note that although I'll be making "mistakes" in my column, all the classic **Magic** mistakes I'll be talking about are 100% true.

So without any further ado, I present my list of classic **Magic** mistakes:

### #1 - Biggest Mistake - Card Design - *Homelands*

I started working for Wizards full time shortly after the *Homelands* release (the fall of '94). And let me tell you, it was a scary time for **Magic**. You see, players were worried that there was a limited number of good ideas and that Wizards couldn't keep putting out good sets. And then along came *Homelands*. And I'll be blunt with you, as someone who's dedicated the last eight years designing **Magic** cards, *Homelands* was a poorly designed set. It wasn't very innovative. It didn't introduce any strong mechanics. It didn't have good synergy. It wasn't particularly elegant. It didn't have many of the qualities that we now judge a set's design by. (To be fair, the set was very flavorful, so it wasn't without any design merit.)

But *Homelands* taught Wizards of the Coast a crucial lesson about **Magic**. The game lives and dies on its design. Players are attracted to the game for many reasons, but the one factor they all care about is how fun the game is to play. If R&D doesn't do their job to make **Magic** a fun game, players will stop buying it. While *Homelands* itself might not have had a huge impact on the game, behind the scenes it changed the way the company thought about design.

### #2 - Biggest Mistake - Card Development - *Urza's Saga*

Last week I was at [Pro Tour New Orleans](#). The format was Extended. After Worlds, R&D banned three cards from the format and *Mirrodin* was added. The result was a blisteringly fast environment with consistent turn three kills and occasional turn two kills (and the super rare turn one kill). Compared to the Extended environment when *Urza's Saga* was first added, this format seems like molasses. The joke at PT Paris (the event where Extended with freshly released *Urza's Saga* was played) was that the game had three stages. The early game - that's the coin flip. The mid game - choosing your mulligans. And the late game - turn one.

As someone who was on the development team I can only shake my head in embarrassment. *Urza's Saga* has cards in it so insanely powerful, a trained monkey should have caught them.

The only set in all existence with a higher power level (and even this is debatable) is *Alpha*. And *Alpha* was working off a very different premise, that the average **Magic** player would only spend \$30 to \$50 on cards meaning that there would only be one **Black Lotus** or one **Ancestral Recall** in the entire neighborhood, and thus could exist at a much higher power level than the other cards.



*Urza's Saga* is the only time in the eight years that I've been working at Wizards that R&D as an entirety got pulled into the president's office and was yelled at. I'm not going to try and explain what happened as I'm not completely sure myself. The important part was that R&D learned a valuable lesson. Design is meaningless without good development. *Urza's Saga* had a lot of cool ideas. But all that was overshadowed by the fact that games lasted an average of a turn and a half. The repercussions of the *Urza's Saga* fiasco led to the hiring of a new wave of R&D hires (Randy Buehler, Brian Schneider, Henry Stern, Worth Wollpert, Elaine Chase, etc.) that paved the way for a completely revamped system of development (the results of which could first be seen in *Invasion*).

### **#3 - Biggest Mistake - Mechanics - Too Strong - *Urza's Saga's* Free Mechanic**

This is one of my personal blunders. I started trying to create simple replacements for cantrips (Cards that cost a card but essentially not mana) and ended up with a mechanic that fundamentally broke the game. The free mechanic, for those that do not recognize the nickname, are spells found in the *Urza's Saga* block that when played untap a number of lands equal to the spell's converted mana cost. (Time Spiral, Frantic Search, Tolarian Winds, etc.)

This mechanic proved to be fundamentally broken. The major problem with it was that players used it as a means of mana generation. Normally, a mechanic can be fixed with costing, but the free mechanic had the weird property of improving as the mana cost was raised. The valuable lesson R&D learned with this mechanic was that not everything created in design can necessarily be balanced in development.

### **#4 - Biggest Mistake - Mechanics - Too Weak - Band with Others**



There are a number of options for this category, but I chose the one that seemed to have wandered the farthest down the wrong path. Band with Others is wrong in so many ways. I would start to explain all the craziness of it, but Mark Gottlieb wrote such an excellent article ("[Absurd or Ridiculous? You Decide](#)") about it, I figured I'd just point you to it.

### **#5 - Biggest Mistake - Mechanics - Too Confusing in the Rules - Licids**

As I've mentioned before, the licids have caused so many rules headaches, the rules team has a running joke to stop acknowledging they exist. The major problem with them is that changing back and forth between two different card types (especially where one is a local effect) opens a can of ugly worms.

While design still experiments with virgin design space and even occasionally sticks its toe into card type changing effects, we have learned to talk to the rules people much earlier in the process.

### **#6 - Biggest Mistake - Card Design - Overpowered - *Yawgmoth's Will***

To me this card wins the prize not because it's the most powerful card ever printed (although that point is up for debate as far as I'm concerned) but that a card as insanely powerful as *Yawgmoth's Will* was created at a time that R&D should have known better. Think about it. *Regrowth* at   lets you return one card to your hand. That card was restricted years before *Urza's Saga* was ever designed.

*Yawgmoth's Will*, for one more mana, lets you essentially regrow every card in your graveyard. True, only for that one turn, but then one turn seems plenty potent especially with cards like **Dark**

Ritual and Lotus Petal that were available in the same Standard environment as Yawgmoth's Will.

The lesson here is that the card designers have to learn to respect the past. If something's was broken before, odds are it might be broken again.

## #7 - Biggest Mistake - Card Design - Underpowered - Sorrow's Path

This card is so bad that I've felt compelled to build decks to try and win with it. The only way to do it with any consistency is to give the land to your opponent and then continually tap it. The card is so bad that the only way to win with it is to somehow get it under the control of your opponent.

To improve as a card designer, I feel its important to understand not just what works but also what doesn't.

## #8 - Biggest Mistake - Card Design - Poorest Fix - Tinker

Tinker came about because I always enjoyed the *Antiquities* card *Transmute Artifact*. But all the "extra mana payment" text seemed a little clunky. So I took it off. Woops. Maybe combining tutoring and comes into play for free should require some extra mana.

Tinker taught me that designers need to understand how a card ticks before they try to update it.

## #9 - Biggest Mistake - Card Design - Rules Problems - Humility

Way, way, way too many rules questions begin with "I have a *Humility* in play". Ironically, I was trying to create a very simple elegant card. The design lesson here is that adding things is good. Taking them away? Danger Will Robinson! Danger! (You have to imagine Robby the Robot saying this for the full effect.)

## #10 - Biggest Mistake - Card Mix in Packaging - Legends

Early *Magic* had its fair share of mistakes dealing with card mix in packaging. The biggest error though happened in *Legends*. All the uncommons were split into two groups, Group A and Group B. Through a mistake, all of the uncommons in a box were only from one of the two groups but not both. This meant that players could not buy a single *Legends* box and collect all the uncommons. Players were forced to find other players with the opposite box and trade.

This story is very enlightening as it demonstrates that there are many different parts of the process that have to be mastered to ensure a quality product. While my and Randy's columns focus on R&D's contributions, its important to remember that there are numerous other sections (editing, production, logistics, etc.) who each have to solve numerous problems to create *Magic* as you know it today.

## #11 - Biggest Mistake - Art - Functionality - Tempest Circles of Protection

While the illustrations on the card have an aesthetic value, they also serve an important role in game play. Instead of having to read every card in play, players can use the art as a visual clue of what each card is. Occasionally though, the art gets in the way of clarity and actually causes confusion. The best example of this is the five Circles of Protection from *Tempest*.



As you can see, the cards are hard to tell apart, especially the White, Black and Shadow Circles. Much greater care is taken nowadays to ensure that cards are not visually indistinguishable from a distance, especially cards within the same limited play environment.

### #13 - Biggest Mistake - Art - Representing Flying - Whippoorwill

Another common confusion art can create is telling whether a creature has flying. The most blatant example of this happened in *The Dark*. In rare green there was a creature called *Whippoorwill*. Be aware that *Whippoorwill* is the name of an actual bird. An actual bird that can fly. And in the art, the creature is shown in mid-flight. All this would be great except for one thing: The card doesn't have flying!

As a result of a number of illustrations like *Whippoorwill*, current art descriptions for creatures always include whether the creature can or cannot fly.



### #14 - Biggest Mistake - Art - Misunderstanding the Card's Title - Hyalopterous Lemure

A lemure is a tortured spirit of the dead that, forever damned, is forced to walk the earth. The *Ice Age* designers thought this would make for a very evocative creature. And when the art came back, what did they get? A lemur. Not a lemure mind you. Not a tortured spirit. Rather a nocturnal, fuzzy mammal.

This is far from the only time an artist has mistakenly drawn the wrong item (Mark Tedin's first take on *Urza's Mine* showed a land mine, for example), but the art department is much more thorough about making sure those mistakes don't actually end up on the card.

### #15 - Biggest Mistake - Art - Misreading the Card's Title - Alchor's Tomb

Much of the flavor of *Legends* comes from D&D campaigns of various designers. One such character is Alchor. You see, Alchor was a wizard played by Wizards of the Coast co-founder and former president and CEO, Peter Adkison. The card was supposed to be Alchor's Tome, a mighty tome of magical spells that such a wizard might use in preparing for battle. Unfortunately, the artist mistook "tome" for "tomb" and drew *Alchor's Tomb*. Thus, at least in the world of *Magic*, Peter's wizard had been killed off.

## #16 - Biggest Mistake - Templating - Dead Ringers

Templating is the science (or some might say art) of writing out **Magic** rules text in a manner that is both technically precise and clear to comprehend. Occasionally, one of these two functions is not met properly. The most grievous example forgoes the latter.

The first reaction most players have is "Huh?"

So what exactly does the card do? Well, it can destroy two creatures. Now, neither one can be black. In addition, the two creatures have to be the exact same color or combination of colors. Are you following along?

Let's take a step back and explain the more interesting question. How did the card end up with such a convoluted and confusing template? The card started simple as a black card that could be used to destroy two creatures of the same color. But the *Planeshift* development team didn't like the idea that the card hosed multi-colored cards (the original card could kill two green creatures even if one was red/green and the other was green/white). The team also asked for the card to be templated such that it couldn't hit artifact creatures.

The templating team was so focused on meeting all the constraints of the card, that they made the classic mistake of not taking two steps back and making sure the text made sense in English as well as **Magic**-ese. This mistake is now used as an example by the templating team of how not to template a card and has led to some innovations in how templates is generated.



## #17 - Biggest Mistake - Line Breaks - Book Burning

I should just start by showing you the card.

You see, the first line doesn't end with a comma, but by breaking there, it sure reads like it wants one. This has led to numerous players writing in saying, "I can deal 6 damage to my opponent if he or she doesn't have **Book Burning** in their hand, right?"

This is a great example of how a tiny detail can ripple into major confusion.

## #18 - Biggest Mistake - New Card Frames - The Artifact Border

I've included this category to stress that we still make mistakes. And this one was a real screw-up on our end. Players shouldn't have to look that close to tell artifacts apart from white cards. But as Randy talked about in his column three Fridays ago ("[A Scary Card Frame Story](#)"), we'll be fixing the problem come *Fifth Dawn*. Read Randy's column for all the details.



## #19 - Biggest Mistake - On The Pro Tour - Terry Borer's "Do You Have Any Fast Effects?"

There have been a number of classic blunders on the Pro Tour. Marco Blume's playing of a **Covetous Dragon** when he had no artifacts in play at Worlds '99. Mark Justice's concession to Mike Long in the finals of PT Paris when Long had no way to win left in his deck. But the king of all screw-ups belongs I believe to a young Canadian named Terry Borer.

The moment in question occurred in the quarter-finals of PT Atlanta. The event was the one and only pro tour to use a pre-release limited format. (*Mirage* being the soon to be released set.)

Borer was playing against fellow Canadian Darwin Kastle. Terry had the win in his hand. All he had to do was attack with a number of creatures. And then after blocking was assigned, he needed to play **Grave Servitude** from his hand on an unblocked creature (and Borer had more attackers than Kastle had blockers) and he would win. Attack. Play **Grave Servitude** on an unblocked creature. Win the game and the match and advance to the semi-finals. But Borer decided to be tricky. After Kastle declared his blockers, Borer asked "Do you have any fast effects?"

The question sounds innocent enough but head judge Charlie Catino understood its importance. When Darwin said no and Terry attempted to play **Grave Servitude**, Catino stepped in. You see, by asking the question, Borer had passed priority. When Kastle declined to play a spell, the opportunity to play spells had passed. Borer's little tricky question made him miss his window for playing the **Grave Servitude**.

Surviving the attack, Kastle was able to win the game on his next turn. But wait, it gets worse. Because Borer made that mistake, he lost that game. Because he lost that game, he lost the match. Because he lost the match, he didn't advance to the semi-final round. Because he didn't advance, Borer did not get the extra pro tour points. Because he didn't get the extra points, he later lost the Pro Player of the Year race to fellow countryman Paul McCabe. One tricky sentence cost Borer the game, the match, possibly the Pro Tour and the Pro Player of the Year title. Ouch.

## #20 - Biggest Mistake - My Column - Using Kamahl and Phage

As I talked about up above, I have a fine history of making blunders in my columns. Probably my biggest mistake was an aside in my column on the creation of **Phage** ("[Phage of Enlightenment](#)"). In the column, I relayed a combo from R&D developer Elaine Chase that used **Phage** in combination with **Volrath's Shapeshifter** and **Kamahl**. The problem was that neither Elaine or I realized that **Phage**'s ability only works with "combat damage" making the little combo not work. (Note that then editor Aaron Forsythe quickly changed the example to **Rorix** to fix the mistake.)

I chose this mistake as it was the one that generated the most mail and discussion in other articles and on the bulletin boards. The lesson here is to always check the card in question. And to get the article in early enough so my editor has time to proof it.

## A Simple Mistake

Hopefully, you had fun today taking a look at the many slip-ups along **Magic**'s history. Without them, the game of **Magic** would not be the game you know today.

Join me next week, when I take to the skies.

Until next time, may you stop to take the time to learn what your mistake has to teach you.

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