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Why good design is so intensely personal

Mark Rosewater · Making Magic
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I know many of you are expecting one of my trademark offbeat columns today. And expectantly so, since I told you I was going to do so. Unfortunately, you're going to have to wait two more weeks. (Two weeks as next week is a theme week.) Instead you get a nostalgic, sappy column. Why? Well, you see, that's the kind of column you write sitting in a hospital room just after your baby is born. Or, in my case, babies.

Yes, I was all prepared to write a very odd column (and once again, it is coming in two weeks) inspired by a very strange idea that popped into my head last week. As I started working on the column I realized that it was going to be much more time intensive than I had planned. And then my wife had a couple of babies (a boy and a girl – and no, they're not identical). We had a few complications that extended our visit (don't worry – mom and babies are all just fine), so I decided to write a column inspired by the birth of my first son and second daughter.

Birth of a Notion



Don't worry, I know this is a **Magic** design column, so you won't have to hear any stories that include words like meconium or colostrum. Instead, I'm going to explain how being a **Magic** designer is often like being a new parent. You see, creative endeavors take on a very personal element. It's my belief that the best creative works require an emotional investment. You can't create truly inspired art (and yes, I actually consider **Magic** design an art form) unless you've invested part of yourself in it. To make something great, you really have to care at a deep, deep level about the thing you're working on. Luckily for me (and I hope for all

of you), **Magic** and I have been having a torrid love affair for years (please don't tell Richard Garfield).

As the theme of today's column is birth, I thought I'd share some stories about the birth of some of the sets I was mostly closely connected with. So what is the birth of a **Magic** expansion? Is it the days or weeks or months that it's first put together? No, that's conception. (Which, to follow my metaphor, is also quite fun.) The birth of a set is the day it comes out for the world to see. After months and months of gestation, it is the day that the **Magic** expansion becomes one with the rest of the game.

I'm often asked how much a designer cares about the public's reaction to his or her set. The answer is a lot. More than a lot. There's not even a word to describe how much we care. I'm a writer. I'm going to just make up a word. Shakespeare did it all the time and he did all right. How much do we care? *Megalot*. That's right, you heard me. Megalot! Designers don't create cards solely for the sake of making them. We design cards because we want to enhance the game of **Magic**. If the audience doesn't like what we've done, we have failed. So yes, I care a great deal what the public thinks. (A quick aside – As I've often explained, not ever card is created for every payer, so I understand that certain cards can upset players it wasn't designed for. In addition, as

I've also explained, not every card can be good, so I understand that everyone is going to dislike something in every set.)

The sets I'm going to talk about today are ones that hold a special place in my heart. For all but one of them, I was the lead designer. For the "birthdate" of each set, I'm counting the date (or first day once they started being two days) of the prerelease. While individual cards may have been previewed, I don't think players can truly judge the set until they get the actual cards into their hands.

Finally, don't expect some bigger message from this column. All I'm trying to do is give you a sense of what it's like for a designer when he sees how his or her set is first perceived.

***Tempest* (October 4, 1997)**

Tempest was my first baby, as **Magic** sets go. I had done development on *Alliances*, *Mirage*, *Visions* and *Weatherlight*. I'd even designed a few cards for each. But *Tempest* was the set I begged for to prove that I could design a set.

And not just an expansion to work on, this design was mine to lead (a practice we no longer follow; to lead the design of a set you have to first prove yourself by working on the designs of other sets). Suffice to say, I was more than a little emotionally invested in *Tempest*.



The prerelease for *Tempest* (in Seattle, at least) was held at Wizards of the Coast's Tournament Center. It's now closed down, but back in the day it was the be-all, end-all of gaming sites. It had it all including an entire basement dedicated to tournaments. And I was there bright and early, as I wasn't about to miss a moment of the action.

I knew *Tempest* was a good set, but I was still a little worried. What if the rest of the world couldn't figure out how good a set it was? Over the years I've gotten better at trusting my instincts as how a set's going to do. But October of 1997 was just two years into my time at Wizards and designing sets was still relatively new to me.

As a designer, my favorite moment at the prerelease is when the players rip open their packs. While I spend a great amount of time reading people's reactions after they've digested the set, nothing tops the adrenaline high of watching a player experience the raw emotion of seeing a card for the first time. The very first card I ever saw opened was the card **Squee's Toy**. I was quite excited as I had come up with the pun in the card's title (who would have guessed?) and I wanted to get the "ugh, that's a bad pun" groan.

But I didn't get it, because the player didn't get it. He was searching through his cards at a rate approaching the speed of sound, so I don't think he bothered to pause and reflect on the name of a random common artifact. I was a little bummed. I would later find out that players would play for weeks and months and not get the pun. (And since that includes some of you, "squeeze toy", like something your dog would play with.) It was much subtler than many of my other puns. And just when I was about to move onto the next player, I see a late card in the pack, **Apes of Rath**. (I came up with that title literally four seconds after Rath was confirmed as the plane's name; it was assigned to an actual card months later) He groaned. And I had my first big smile at the *Tempest* prerelease.

As I continued down the row, I got a chance to see the first impression of each mechanic and lots and lots of individual cards. My memory of that walk is now just a blur of different snippets of conversation:

"Isn't this better than **Plague Rats** and **Grizzly Bears**?"
"Oh my god. Buyback is broken!"
"The white atog! The white atog!"
"Why would you ever pay mana to destroy your own stuff?"
"I guess they were trying to make a Lotus that sucks. Mission accomplished."
"It doubles all damage? Didn't they restrict **Berserk**?"
"It destroys everything. Everything!"
"Did you get a lcid? What the hell does it do?"
"Oh my god, shadow is broken."
"Sure you can **Boomerang** every turn. For six mana!"
"No, +3/+3 to *all* your creatures."
"Oh my god, **Ghost Town** is broken."
"Which COP is that?"
"It's a land that destroys lands. Didn't they restrict **Strip**



Mine?"

"I don't get it. Is it a creature or an enchantment?"

"They reprinted **Pacifism**? That was just in *Mirage*."

"Yes I can, read the card."

"Isn't this just flying?"

"I've got four slivers. What do you have?"

"Why is this bearded guy in every other picture?"

"Have you seen **Lobotomy**?"

"Oh my god, the licids are broken."

"It's just a sucky **Savannah Lions**. Man R&D hates red."

"Can't be countered? Cool!"

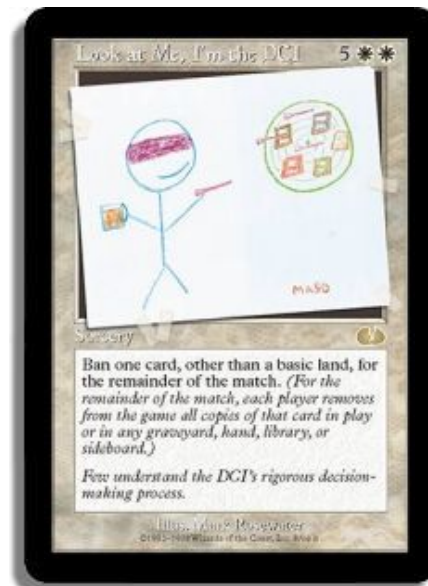
In general, the players were quite happy. Each round, I'd wander the floor watching different matches. People were smiling and laughing. All the mechanics were seeing play. Even the licids. Between rounds players were trying to trade for as many slivers as possible. Debates were erupting over how good buyback was. And a few people were even trying to piece together the *Tempest* story. ("See, he's knocked off the boat here and here. And then he's falling here.")

At the time, it was my best day ever on the job. One of the great things about my job is that I have the opportunity to actually see what people do with my work. My hours and hours of labor (along with numerous hours of numerous co-workers) result in joy and excitement. I don't think I can adequately describe in words how good that makes me feel. Okay, a megalot of good.



Unglued (August 7, 1998)

One of the ongoing themes of this column is how important structure is to creativity. So what happens when you have a set where you're instructed to break the rules? No, I mean *really* break the rules. The answer is it's quite difficult. On top of that I was the design and development team for *Unglued*. (Please be aware that many other people did submit cards, so I wasn't the only designer just the only one on the team.) There were only five "**Magic** R&D guys" back then so we were stretched pretty tight. I was the weird, creative guy who used to write comedy for a living so I got the gig.



And I worked my butt off. I was quite proud of how the set came out. I felt that I had done a good job of both finding taboo areas to play with as well as making some honest jokes at **Magic's** and Wizards' expense. On top of that, it was actually funny. (Once again, I had help on the card names and flavor text. This wasn't by any stretch a one-man show.)

The *Unglued* prerelease will probably go down as my most interesting prerelease ever. Why you ask? Well, for starters, one day we were in an *Unglued* meeting when the subject of the prerelease came up. See, we had planned to premiere the set at GenCon along with a series of prerelease tournaments. We were brainstorming ideas (the *Unglued* prerelease couldn't be the same old, same old after all), when I said, (and remember the set had a chicken theme) "I could head judge the event dressed as a chicken."

The moment I uttered the words, the brainstorming stopped. There was ten seconds of silence. Tina, the brand manager of the product, then said "okay" and it was done. They moved onto a new topic. I guess once you offer to head judge a tournament dressed as a chicken there's really not much else to discuss.

During the next few months, I had no idea whether or not anyone had actually taken me seriously. I wasn't even sure how much I took me seriously. Then one day, Tina showed up with a chicken outfit. "Try this on," she said.

Cut to GenCon. I start the first prerelease tournament in full chicken regalia (I would later remove the head for most of the tournament as I was unable to actually see out of it making for some rough judging):

I guess I should begin by saying... bock, bock, bock. I'm your head judge Mark Rosewater. You might notice that I am not wearing standard judging gear. You should take this as a sign that this tournament might not be run as a traditional tournament. To begin: the purpose of this tournament is for all of you to have fun. While winning is not pointless, it is not the driving force it is in most tournaments. If you look over my shoulder you will see a table stock full of prizes. How do you win these prizes? By having the proper raffle ticket. How do you get raffle tickets? Boy, you guys ask a lot of questions. You get raffle tickets by doing one of numerous things. Winning a match, for example, wins you one ticket. Doing the hokey pokey at the top of your lungs while standing on the table? Two tickets. I think you'll see where this is going.



I then went on to cover a laundry list of ways to earn a ticket. My favorite was telling a really bad pun (that I hadn't heard yet) while in my presence earned you five tickets. Surprise, surprise, I got quite a number of chicken jokes.

The prereleases (and there were several of them as there were flights all weekend) were awesome. Everyone got into the spirit of *Unglued* and it was a joy to watch. I might have even done a chicken dance or two. I'll end this section with the favorite line I heard that weekend:

"In response to your declaration of attack, I remove my pants."

***Urza's Destiny* (May 29, 1999)**



Every set has its defining trait. For *Urza's Destiny* it was that it is the only set where I truly (remember, everyone and their brother submitted cards for *Unglued*) did a solo design. While I do not recommend doing this all the time, it was an interesting experience for me. And I was happy with how it turned out

(although with 20/20 hindsight, perhaps development could have caught a few more of my "crazy broken" cards).

For the *Urza's Destiny* prerelease I was in Florida. At The Walt Disney's Wide World of Sports complex to be exact. I was there for the Junior Super Series. The main side event was the *Urza's Destiny* prerelease. As I was busy judging, I didn't have time to walk the aisles as I normally do, but I did schedule breaks during all the pack openings. To be honest, the *Urza's Destiny* prerelease wasn't as special to me as *Tempest* or *Unglued*. Most of my memories of the event were of attendees playing a game of "That's crazy, but can you believe they printed this?"

My most memorable conversation I had was with a player who felt he had gotten junk rares. With my usual dramatic license, I believe it went something like this: (and while I might be peppering up the jokes, I swear to god the essence of this discussion is 100% true)

Him: So you were one of the designers on this set?

Me: I was *the* designer. So, if you don't like something I got no one else to blame.

Him: I do have an issue. I understand you have to have crappy cards. But why at rare? Why?

Me: (under my breath) Damn, I have to get a weekly online column.

Him: The set looks okay, but what am I going to do with these?

Me: *Replenish*, *Academy Rector* and *Opalescence*? *These* are your three rares? *These* are the bad cards?

Him: Yes.

Me: Do you not play the color white?

Him: No, I like white.

Me: Do you have some phobia about enchantments?

Him: No.

Me: Is the fact that the three cards blatantly all go in the same deck off-putting?

Him: What do you mean?

Me: You have a card that returns all enchantments to play. A card that can tutor for any enchantment. And a card that turns all enchantments into creatures. All in the same color.

Him: What?

Me: Seeing a possible theme?
Him: I'm not following you.
(There is a thirty second pause.)
Me: Crappy cards, huh?
Him: Yeah.
Me: I'll work on it.

In the end, I realized that *Urza's Destiny* did an excellent job of capping off the theme of the Urza block: broken, broken cards.

***Invasion* (September 23, 2000)**

This is the only set I'm listing today whose design I didn't lead. *Invasion* has always felt very personal to me for several reasons. First, its design was very special. Bill Rose, Mike Elliott and I traveled to my dad's home in Lake Tahoe for a week and designed the set. You have to understand that normally, sets take months to design. The three of us put together the crux of the set in four days (five if you count the day we took off to go skiing).



Bill Rose

How did we do it so fast? First, we had a design to use as a jumping off point. That set was called Spectral Chaos and it was designed by a man named Barry Reich. Second, the three of us had a unified vision and the theme was very juicy in design space.



Mike Elliott

The second reason I feel so close to the set is that my favorite mechanic I ever designed (the split cards) was premiering in the set. They took a lot of effort to keep in the set, (for the full story, see "[Split Decisions](#)") so I was quite pumped to see what the players thought of them.

Unlike many of the last sets, I knew *Invasion* was a runaway hit. I believed the split cards were a run-away hit as well, but I also knew I was as biased as a human being could be about them, so I was eager to see the public's reaction first hand.

When the packs were ripped open I was standing behind a young man in his older teens. First pack, no split cards. Second pack, no split cards. Third pack, halfway through, he gets an Assault & Battery (quick aside – when I named the split cards it was always my attempt that the names would use an ampersand; it upset me that I went to all this work to get names that work with blank and blank and they're all listed as blank/blank). The card stops him dead in his tracks. He turns it sideways and looks at it. Then he turns to his friend, "What in the hell is this?"

His friend shrugs. "Whatever it is," he adds, "it's freakin' cool."

I might have pumped my fist in the air and did an abbreviated victory dance.

***Odyssey* (September 22, 2001)**



There is an old saying that an artist's greatest adversary is his own past. I felt this as I was leading *Odyssey* design. We had to follow *Invasion*. *Invasion!* Everyone loved *Invasion*. The whole block. It had gotten the most positive response of any set we'd designed since I'd been at the company.

During my college days, I used to do stand-up in local comedy clubs (and Boston has quite a number of them). I performed on what was known as open mike night. This was always Mondays, the low ebb in the comedy club's business. Open mike night has two purposes. First, it allows new comedians to get discovered. And second, it allows established comedians a place to try their new, and thus untested, material. This means that in between random guys you've never heard of would be an established pro. Every once in a while it wouldn't be just a pro, but a stand-up all-star. Steven Wright, for example, was from Boston and occasionally would pop in.

Now some poor schlub had to be the guy that went up after Stephen Wright. And you know what? There is no physical way to be funnier than an established name comedian. The audience already knows him and his comic persona. The celebrity status alone raised the bar several notches. Going after a pro, you just don't have a prayer. So what do you do? If you're good, you just try to do something solid but different. You're not trying to top the pro, merely ride his wave. This was the strategy we used on *Odyssey*.

We couldn't top *Invasion*, so we simply tried to be different. Now I'm a fan of the underdog (and Underdog, but that's for a different column) so I have a soft spot in my heart for *Odyssey*. But I knew going to the prerelease that this was the first time that underlying the surface worry was an

underlayer of greater worry. I liked what the set was trying to do, but it was very subtle and interconnected. It required a great deal of thought and it revolved around an area of play that players don't spend too much time thinking about.

Odyssey is an important section here, as this was the first prerelease I, as a designer, took it on the chin. While the set was no *Homelands*, it wasn't in the ballpark of *Invasion*. It wasn't even in the parking lot of the ballpark. I spent almost all of my time at the *Odyssey* prerelease defending the set. Ironically, most players thought the set had too low a power level. (A year later *Odyssey* would single-handedly outnumber the entire *Invasion* block in top Regionals decklists.)

As the saying goes, failure is the world's best teacher. And I learned a lot from *Odyssey*. That isn't to say that *Odyssey* did nothing right, because it did. But I did learn a lot about what players don't like. And I put that knowledge to good use designing *Mirrodin*.

***Mirrodin* (September 20, 2003)**

While everyone in R&D knew "artifacts" was worthy of a block theme, there were some doubts about how popular a theme it was. But I always had faith. I knew artifacts was a theme up there with multi-color and tribal. If we did it right, the set (heck, the block) was going to be a hit. And I knew many, many months before the prerelease that we did it right.



I'd been hyping the set for months because I knew it could deliver. So, of course, I was dying for the prerelease. And then came the fateful news, I'd have to miss it? What?! You see, I'd promised my wife for five years that we'd celebrate our fifth anniversary with a cruise (we went on a cruise for our honeymoon). The cruise was booked for the 21st. The day after the prerelease. But as we were working out the flight schedules, it became clear that to make the boat, we had to travel the day before.

The boat was leaving out of New Orleans, so I tried to see if I could go to the New Orleans prerelease, but our plane just got in too late. The set was finally going to become public knowledge and I would be spending my first week cut off from the world.

That is, until I got on the boat and learned that it had an Internet room. You had to pay an obscene sum of money, but that room offered a window into the real world. So every night, after my family went to sleep, I would go down to the Internet room and read everything I could on *Mirrodin*. Every tournament report, every article, every bulletin board thread. If the word *Mirrodin* appeared in a piece of writing on the Internet that week, I read it.

A lot of the information had to be read between the lines (players upset that they got turned away, for example), but I could see *Mirrodin* was the hit I expected it to be.

More Babies On The Way



While my wife and I are personally calling it quits (we were planning to stop at two – we always joked that it would allow us to play man-on-man defense and now we were forced into zone), I plan on having many more **Magic** babies. I'm already done with *Fifth Dawn*. *Control* (the codename for the large set for 2005) has just started up (with an all-star design team incidentally). And a few projects to be named later are in the wings.

I hope my little "birth" recap was enjoyable (it ended up being a little longer than I anticipated) and showed a different side of the designer. Join me next week, when I'll be

back in black.

Until then, may you know the joy of bringing something special into this world.

Mark Rosewater

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