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A different kind of mailbag column

Mark Rosewater · Making Magic
Monday, April 12, 2004

About three or four times a year I have mailbag columns where I answer letters from my readers. In those columns I talk about the different responses I receive to my various columns. But those letters are only part of my mail. I also get a steady stream of letters with non-column themes. This week, I thought I would take a look at those. And from my love of David Letterman, I thought I would do so with a Top Ten List. (Although I should point out that my list isn't all that funny.)

Below are the top ten non-column related topics that I receive:

#10 - Can I get you to autograph a card?

I get asked this quite a bit. The answer is always yes. If you want me to sign a card (or even more than one) you need to send it to me at the following address:

Mark Rosewater
c/o Wizards of the Coast
P.O. Box 707
Renton, WA 98055

Remember that you must include a self-addressed stamped envelope. Also remember to include something to keep the card from getting bent in the mail.



#9 - Print Unglued II.

Done. :) (If you don't know what I'm talking about, check [last week's column](#))

The reason I included this message was to stress how important it is to make your issues known. I use my mailbox as a barometer of the public's opinion. The way I know if an issue is important is by how many e-mails I get on the topic. If you care about something add your voice to the crowd. There really is power in numbers.

My job (as well as all of R&D) is to make all of you happy. But we can't do that if we don't know what you want. This is an ongoing theme in my column – you have the power to affect **Magic**. But to do so you have to take the important step of letting us know what you want. Whether that's writing an article, talking on the bulletin boards or writing me a letter, you need to get your issues in front of the eyes of R&D. As *Unhinged* proves, we are very responsive to the public's desires. But we can't accomplish what we don't know about.

#8 - Write back to me.

A lot of people write in to me very intent with getting a reply. And the hard truth is that I simply don't have time to reply to the vast majority of people who write me. I get hundreds (and sometimes thousands) of letters a week. I make an effort to read them all because I value



having a link to the public, but between my job (new promotion) and home life (new twins), I just don't have the time.

This isn't to say I don't reply to people, because I do. So here are a few tips to increase your chance of getting a reply.

1. **Don't demand a reply** – Nothing makes me less interested in replying than having a letter demand I do so. If there are reasons for replying (see below), I will. Just being told I should is not one of them.
2. **Write an interesting letter** – The number one reason for replying is that I enjoyed the letter. This isn't to say that I reply to every interesting letter, but it does increase the possibility.
3. **Ask interesting questions** – One of the best ways to get a response is to ask a question that I want to answer.
4. **Be polite** – A reply is a courtesy on my part. I feel no need to extend a courtesy to someone who is rude to me.
5. **Write a well-crafted letter** – I talk about this below.

#7 - I have a rules question./Can you help me build my deck?

For some reason I get a lot of these e-mails. And while I'm sympathetic, I simply do not have the time to answer them. In addition, there are much better resources on the Internet for both rules and deck building than me. On magicthegathering.com, for example, there is Rune Horvik's "[Saturday School](#)" for rules questions. Because of how busy the site is, we can't realistically answer emails asking for deck help, but there are lots of articles on our website that offer deck building advice and ideas for inspiration, such as Mark Gottlieb's "[House of Cards](#)" column.

COLUMN KEY		
Pic	Author	Column Name
	Rune Horvik	SATURDAY SCHOOL
	Mark Gottlieb	HOUSE OF CARDS

#6 - Have you seen this article/bulletin board thread?

Quite often I get a letter that asks if I've seen a particular article or bulletin board thread. And when I get them I go and look. Why? Because I want to get the public's opinion. If you feel someone (even if that someone is you) voiced a concern eloquently then I want to see it. And if I think it's something important, I make sure other members of R&D see it.

So please don't stop pointing out interesting articles and threads. I consider it to be a valuable resource.

#5 – You suck./Stop destroying the game.

There are good and bad things about having your own column. The good is coming up next, but here's the bad. You become a lightning rod for all discontent. A lot of my friends and family seem to get upset when they see how I'm occasionally treated online. I know better. Being the public face of the company means I get more than my share of credit and blame. One of the jokes here is that I alternate weekly between destroying the game and saving it.

I'm actually quite intrigued by the nasty letters. First, they are a valid form of player information; sort of an extreme constructive criticism. Second, they are often quite humorous. And third, they help keep me grounded. They stress to me that we need to constantly strive to improve **Magic**. Just because some people are happy doesn't mean our job is done.

So, if you're unhappy with what I'm doing, I want to know. To quote a cult cheerleading movie, bring it on.

#4 - Thank you for all your hard work.

And then comes the flip side of the coin, the complimentary letter. Quite a number of readers write in to let me know they like what I'm doing (and notice that the nice letters rank higher than the mean ones). Both as



a **Magic** designer and as a columnist. I take great pride in my work, so it is very fulfilling to hear from the people that I'm working so hard to please.

Too often people forget the importance of positive feedback. Yes, negative (aka constructive) feedback has an important role, but it is not any more important than positive feedback. If I do something right, I want to know. Otherwise, I might not repeat it. This is especially true in my column. Because I have such a varied readership I try very hard to mix up my columns both in content and style. This experimentation produces both gems and stinkers. While I often can tell one from another, being so close to the writing sometimes blurs them. This is where your feedback is essential.

If you really enjoy a particular column, you need to let me know. Likewise, if you hate it, you should also tell me. This is how I figure out which experiments to repeat and which ones to bury deep beneath the ground.

Finally, these letters make me feel good (and don't underestimate the power of morale), so I'm always happy to see them.



#3 - Can you look at the cards I designed?

The short, blunt answer is no, I cannot. As the person in charge of overseeing **Magic** design, I have to avoid looking at unsolicited material. This means whenever I stumble upon homemade cards in an e-mail I have to immediately stop reading. I wish I could be available for feedback (especially since I am fascinated by the design process), but my current responsibility keeps me from being able to do so. Sorry.

#2 - Here's my suggestion of how to help Magic

Many people use my e-mail as a means to make suggestions about how to improve the game. In fact, these e-mails were what inspired me to write my audience survey article ("[Talk To Me](#)"). I appreciate these e-mails as they provide an invaluable resource. I'm not even talking about the solutions offered (although often these are quite useful). What makes these e-mails so important is they effectively identify problems.

I'm a pretty good problem solver, but I'm not the best problem finder. The letters from the public do an excellent job of letting me know what **Magic's** current weak spots are. If you're interested in writing me a "suggestion" letter, here are a few tips how to strengthen your message:

1. **Keep it short** – Too often people bury important content in a flood of words. I cannot stress how much stronger a short letter is. Get in, make your point, get out.
2. **Keep to one topic** – This is a similar issue to the last one. Too often people muddle their letters by straying from topic to topic. This softens the focus of your letter. Pick the key point you want to make and stick to it. If you have other topics, save them for a different letter (and yes, you're allowed to write to me as often as you want).
3. **Start with your key point** – In journalism this is called your "lead". Let your reader know the important stuff up front. This way they (or in this case I) understand from the beginning what you're trying to say.
4. **Use examples** – If you don't like something (or if you do) make sure to give concrete examples that make your point. Too often I get complaints that are ambiguous or simply nonsensical. Examples help hammer home your point.
5. **Make it look good** – A letter with typos or bad grammar makes the reader feel as if the writer doesn't really care. If they weren't willing to put in the time to clean up the letter, how important could it be? Just as you wouldn't show up to an interview in rags and covered in dirt, don't present yourself in a letter in any way that implies laziness or carelessness on your part.
6. **Be nice** – The reason you're writing is to try and institute change. This is much more effective if you get me, the reader, on your side. The second you start attacking me, I start pulling away. As they say, you catch more flies with honey than vinegar.
7. **Identify the problem** – If you believe change is necessary, make sure you explain what is wrong with the status quo. As I said above, understanding the problem is the key point I look for in a letter.

8. **Offer solutions** – Once you've identified the problem, offer your suggestion how to fix it. This way you are not merely knocking something down, you are attempting to rebuild it.

If you follow these guidelines, I promise you that your letters (to anyone, not just me) will pack much greater punch.

#1 - How can I get a job working in R&D?

This is by far and away the most popular letter I receive. I like to think it's because I'm good at explaining how fun my job is. So, how do you get a job here?



First, finish college. Every member of TCG R&D (that's "Trading Card Game Research & Development" for those unfamiliar with the acronyms) has a minimum of an undergraduate college degree. Many have master degrees. One even has a doctorate degree. (If you count Richard Garfield, who still helps out from time to time, we have two.)

Second, play a lot of games. If you want to design and development games for a living, you need to have a good understanding of what makes games tick. I'm sure some of you are asking why I would recommend playing games other than trading card games for a position in TCG R&D. The answer is that we are constantly evolving the TCG genre and a good understanding of games at large is a useful skill.

Third, the key to get hiring by R&D is by making a name for yourself in trading card games. As far as **Magic** is concerned, there are two ways I can recommend to do this. First, is the Pro Tour. The top pro players have demonstrated that they understand how the game works. Thus, when R&D is looking for new developers, this is where we look first. The statistic we often quote is that of all the TCG R&D members currently employed by Wizards, all but one (who incidentally doesn't work on **Magic**) has either played in a Pro Tour or has never been eligible to play in one (Wizards employees cannot play in sanctioned events.).

But I believe there is a second way. One of the most important things we look for here in R&D is the ability to demonstrate a firm understanding of the principles of trading card games. You can do this even if you don't have the play skills. The key is writing online. Prove to us that you understand what we do by showing us with your words. R&D reads the vast majority of the **Magic** content online. If you have something interesting to say on an ongoing basis, we will notice.

Fourth, understanding as much as possible about how Wizards TCG R&D works is a valuable skill. If only we had a website dedicated to the "behind-the-scenes" of **Magic** design and development. :) Am I saying that reading my column (along with Aaron Forsythe's "[Latest Developments](#)") is not just entertaining and educational but it increases your chances of getting a job in R&D? Why yes I am.

COLUMN KEY		
Pic	Author	Column Name
	Mark Rosewater	MAKING MAGIC
	Aaron Forsythe	LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

Fifth, and this is the toughest one. You need to get very, very lucky. You see, I get hundreds of letters a year asking how to get a job. On the average year, we probably hire one new R&D position. Some years it's more, but other years it's zero. (And remember, very few R&D members leave.) This means that the competition for an R&D job is quite steep. Please keep this reality in mind as you dream of an R&D job.

If I haven't scared you away yet, here's the last piece of information. Every job at Wizards of the Coast is posted on our [Career Opportunities page](#). If you want to know when a job comes up (and I stress that there are many cool jobs here at Wizards other than R&D), this is where you need to look. When an R&D job pops up, make sure to put together a professional looking resume that stresses many of the points I make above and mail it in on time.

I believe strongly that someone reading this column today will someday work for R&D. I can imagine a day in the future where some new recruit says, "You know, I remember reading your column one day..."

And that, my friends, is all you wrote. I hope today has given you some insight into what my inbox looks like.

Join me next week when I look at the slowest card type in **Magic**.

Until then, may you dream of being that one guy (or gal).

Mark may be reached at makingmagic@wizards.com.

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