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Welcome to Sorcery Week!

Mark Rosewater · Making Magic
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Welcome to Sorcery Week! This week we'll be talking about the slower side of **Magic**. My first thought was to write an article about the separation between sorceries and instants. But something seemed very familiar about the idea. After a quick peek at the "Making **Magic**" archive, I realized I wrote that article during Instant Week ("[Instant Winners](#)", April June 23, 2003). This is one of the side effects of writing a weekly article for twenty eight months. But don't worry. I got another good topic. Today I am going to answer a question that I'll bet a number of you have asked yourself: Why does **Magic** need sorceries? Wouldn't the game just be better if all non-permanent spells were just instants?

The answer? No, it wouldn't.

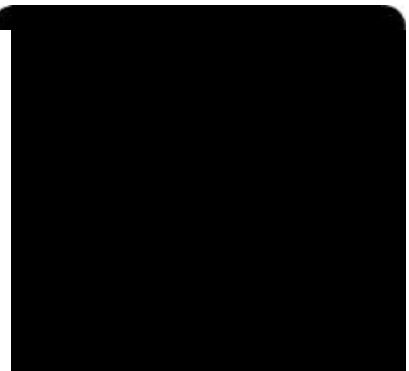
Any other topics? Wait, you'd like to know why it wouldn't be better. You're interested in what sorceries offer the game. You'd like my opinion on why sorceries are fundamental to **Magic**. Okay, since you asked so nicely. Here are the reasons sorceries enhance the game: (as always in no particular order)

#1 – The Game Is Better When Players Are Forced To Make Decisions

When designing a **Magic** card, we always walk a fine line between increasing options and forcing decisions. Increasing options means that we allow the player more freedom in using the card. Sometimes that means it does more than one thing. Sometimes that means it has a unique function depending on which cards it interacts with. And sometimes, it means that it can be used at the largest variety of times (we call these instants). Forcing decisions means that we make the player have to make a choice when using the card. The outcome of this decision is not immediate, thus forcing the player to deduce the impact of his choices. Sometimes this means making a long-term decision when the card is first played. Sometimes this means forcing players to commit to things before all the information is known. And sometimes we restrict when the card can be played (often, but not always, we call these sorceries).

The reason I bring these two factors up together is that often they can work against one another. By giving a player more options with his card we often lessen the decisions we force upon the player. For example, let's take a look at the difference between **Mogg Fanatic** and **Barbarian Lunatic**. Both can be sacrificed to deal damage to a creature (and yes, **Mogg Fanatic** can also hit a player). But **Mogg Fanatic** does it for free while **Barbarian Lunatic** requires mana.

Mogg Fanatic gives you more options. It can be used at anytime regardless of the state of your lands. **Barbarian Lunatic** has more decisions. It requires a lot more commitment. In order to use his ability, you have to have the three mana. For example, lets imagine it's the beginning of your main phase. With **Mogg Fanatic** in play, you have no decisions that affect what or how you play your spells. Because it requires no mana to activate you can essentially use it whenever you need to. **Barbarian Lunatic**, on the other hand, demands decision making. If you want to be able to use his ability, you have to keep three land available. This will restrict what spells you can play. It will make you balance the



cost of playing a spell on your turn versus having the potential threat of the **Barbarian Lunatic** during your opponent's turn.

The **Mogg Fanatic** is clearly more powerful (and players always enjoy power) but it is less interesting from a strategic perspective. If all our creatures with activations were free of mana costs, the game would be less strategic, and thus, I believe, less fun. The same holds true for spell speed. Sorceries force players to choose a path. Do you want to invest your mana now in a Sorcery, or save it for potential use during your opponent's turn?

A current example of this philosophy is card drawing. It has proven to be such a strong ability, R&D made the conscious decision to make the vast majority of mass card drawing (defined as three or more cards) sorceries. When card drawing appeared on instants, the blue player had no hard decisions. Hold a counterspell until the end of your opponent's turn. If he or she hasn't played a scary card that turn (requiring the counterspell), draw some cards. Once again, the instant version is more powerful but less interesting strategically.



Decisions enhance strategy (and fun).

I'm sure a number of blue mages are groaning at the last paragraph. You preferred power over strategic interest. Of course you do. It's the player's prerogative to have as much power as possible. You want to win. But, you see, R&D has a very different perspective. We're not shaded by a desire to win. Our motivation is making the best gameplay possible. To do that, we have to often make you do things you might not choose to do yourself. We, on purpose, have to make your game experience harder. We have to force you to make decisions and then live by those decisions.

The end result is a game that forces players to plan ahead. A game with more suspense. A game with more visceral thrill. A game that better ebbs and flows. And most importantly, a game that better rewards skill.

#2 – The Main Phase Is A Better Time To Play

To understand the strength of sorceries, you have to understand the world of all instants. So let's imagine that world. The strength of instants lies in their flexibility. Because they could be used at essentially any time, you hold on to them until that need arises. For reactive spells, you wait until the thing you need to react to happens. For proactive spells, you tend to play them at the end of your opponent's turn. This is the most efficient time because it lessens your vulnerability of being tapped out.

Would the game of **Magic** be better if most of the spells happened at the end of the turns? I don't think so. Why? Because it would get monotonous. No game is fun if it gets too predictable. In addition it greatly lessens the importance of mana, a key part of the game. Third, it creates a standoff. Both players are incentivized to let the opponent make the first move, allowing them the ability to react. This results in both players hoarding spells waiting for their opponent to blink. Quoting the *Great Book of Magic Design*, Rule #124: "Making the players do nothing just isn't fun."

#3 – Sorceries Force More Player Interaction

The most important impact of reason #2 is reason #3. **Magic** is best when players fling spells back and forth. But for this to happen, someone has to start. When one player has a sorcery and the other has an instant, guess what? Problem solved. The player with the sorcery is forced to make a commitment. This is why most big effects are sorceries. If you're going to ask God to get angry and wipe out all living creatures (must be the *Old Testament* God), you have to be the one stepping up to the plate.

This point is an important one so I'm going to take three more paragraphs to drive the point home. Interaction is at the core of what makes **Magic** a great game. Anything that pulls players away from interacting with one another is fundamentally hurting the game. The best example of this was *Urza's Saga* block. It created a time dubbed "Combo Winter". The triumvirate of strong engines, good card drawing, and lands capable of producing huge amounts of mana created an environment where players could win very quickly with a two or three card combo. So fast, in fact, that the games became dual solitaire games where each player was racing to have his combo go off first.

Combo Winter hammered home to R&D the importance of interaction. As a result we stopped creating lands that produce multiple mana (stopped is harsh, majorly pulled back), increased the cost of our giant card drawers (defined as drawing five or more cards), and started playtesting engines more. As a quick aside, R&D differentiates between "speed combos" and "slow combos". Speed combos, such as those during Combo Winter, create dual solitaire environments. Slow combos function much like control decks as they require the player to survive long enough to set up their victory condition. Speed combos are not fun. Slow combos allow a player to more quickly end the game once they've gained control of it. So, R&D is going to continue to halt speed combos while supporting slow combos. (*Fifth Dawn*, cough, cough.)



Sorceries force players to commit, and they reward that commitment with bigger effects.

The world of all instants is simply less interactive. Interaction is fundamental to good **Magic** design. Therefore, using inductive logic, sorceries are good for **Magic**. See, that logic course in college did pay off.

#4 – There Are Things You Don't Want To Have Happen At Instant Speed



Not all effects are created equal. As such, R&D needs the ability to strengthen some abilities and weaken others. Let's take discard, for example. Card advantage (or card disadvantage depending on how you look at it) is a very powerful force in the game. In addition, players don't like being forced to discard their cards. You put them in your deck to play them. What fun is being forced to discard them? On the other hand, it's an important part of the flavor of black (not really the color that cares if it upsets its opponent – I take that back, it cares; it likes it). So how do we find an acceptable medium?

Well, what if we make a general rule that says that players have some window to use a card before their opponent can force them to discard it? How do we do that? Make all discard spells sorceries. This way, the opponent can always play a card the turn they played it. (And note that with cards such as **Funeral Charm**, we do make exceptions to this rule.)

In short, sorceries are an important tool for designers and developers. It allows them to tweak a card without needing to change its effect or mana cost.

#5 – There Are Things That Can't Happen At Instant Speed

Our rules manager is a man named Paul Barclay. Sometimes I like to picture him as Scotty from the original *Star Trek* (which is extra funny if you know he's English). "I'm sorry captain, I cannot change the laws of physics."

Why do I bring this up? Because every once in a while I design an instant and have the following conversation with Paul: (as always, this conversation is a creation of dramatic license)

Me: So Paul, what do you think of my new instant?
Paul: What instant?
Me: The card I just showed you.
Paul: You mean the sorcery?
Me: No, it's an instant.
Paul: Do you want it to have the card power currently written on the card?
Me: Yes.
Paul: Then it's a sorcery.

The point of this little story is that there exist effects that just can't (or maybe I'll say shouldn't for those of you willing to play a game where chaos runs rampant) be instants. Having sorceries allows the cards to be printed.

Words and Sorcery

As you can see, sorceries do a great deal of good for the game. They add decisions. They increase variety. They add player interaction. They allow designers and developers to better balance the game. And they keep chaos from reigning supreme. What more could you ask for?

Join me next week when I collect my thoughts.

Until then, may you earn your fun.

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