

## The story of *Fifth Dawn's* fourth designer. **There and Back Again**

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**L**ast year one magic player got to live the dream and design cards for his favorite game. I am that player, and this is my story.

Sherman, set the way-back machine to the summer of 2002. I had decided to change careers and enter the world of game design. I've been playing **Magic** since Arabian Nights, and couldn't think of a better gaming job than designing it (if you're going to dream, dream big). For the first attempt to get my foot in the door at Wizards of the Coast, I sent them a sample board game of my own design with a nice cover letter and resume, but I was basically ignored. I expected some resistance, and I wasn't going to let this setback bother me. I thought up another way to get their attention: create an entire set of magic cards on my own and parade them in front of WotC's face, until they were so amazed that they would immediately hire me.

Four months later my set was 50% complete and I was poking around **Magic** websites, when I realized a Pro Tour event was to be held in Chicago just under two months in the future. The notice also mentioned that Mark Rosewater would be holding a trivia contest there. Here was an opportunity I couldn't miss: a time and place I knew Mark would be available in person to see my work.

I planned to get the attention of the players at PT-Chicago and generate buzz about my work, so that Wizards employees, especially Mark, couldn't resist taking a peek. To this end, I made a big sign with the words, "Playtest new cards, free," and brought it along with more than 1200 cards (8 each of the commons, 3 each of the uncommons, and 1 each of the rares from my approximately 300-card set) sorted into mock booster packs. I printed text onto mailing labels and stuck them over land and extra commons I found lying around and the result was much like the playtest cards you see from time to time on [magicthegathering.com](http://magicthegathering.com).

When I arrived early Friday morning, almost everyone was focused on the draft for the first round of the main event. Apparently, for the most part only the pro-tour players show up before noon, because there's nothing to do at an invitation-only event on a weekday until some players are eliminated and side events can begin. After straining for five minutes to see how it was going, I gave up and wandered back to the nearly deserted "open gaming" side of the hall.

I noticed a group of non-competitors fiddling around in the open section, so I made them my first test case. I approached them and politely asked if they were interested in trying some **Magic** cards I'd designed. Equally politely, they informed me they were more interested in



continuing to fiddle with the decks of real **Magic** cards they already had. I was

certainly off to a flying start. The next few people I tried were somewhat more receptive. I didn't feel they were thrilled, but they did seem to be amused at least. After a game or two, they decided to do other things, and I moved to an empty table in a highly visible, central location, to await further prey.

Players began to trickle out of the main event, and soon the first round was over. I felt quite self-conscious as almost no one gave me more than a second glance. "One loss won't put you out, so they still have too much focus on the main event," I told myself. Presently, the second round began and my side of the room emptied out again. Just as I finished eating lunch, I spied Mark Rosewater hovering near the feature match arena. I got up, and a small wave of nausea descended through my internal organs. All too aware of how important first impressions are, I tried to wait for a break in his conversation with two other judges, so as not to appear rude. Naturally, no such break occurred, and I began to feel like some kind of weirdo just standing there, hovering over Mark's shoulder.

My courage rallied before this little game went into overtime, and I took advantage of a small pause to introduce myself. I explained, slightly too rapidly in my excitement, that I had designed some cards and I would love to get his advice and counsel on them. I was



mindful not to mention any of my career aspirations just yet. I wanted only to appeal to his (obviously justified) king of magic design ego, and appear as a simple fan wishing for hints from the master. Mark explained that he was very busy, and that for legal reasons, he made it a policy not to look at anything. For this, however, I was prepared. I replied with something to the effect of, "I will sign anything you want, I'd be delighted if any of my ideas were to appear as part of a future card." Nevertheless, Mark could only agree to think about it, reiterating that the legal team might do unspeakable things to him if he started taking unsolicited cards ideas. For the time being, I had to be satisfied that he didn't call security.

After the second round, more spectators rolled in and I got another set of guinea pigs, which seemed to go better. As the day wore on more players showed interest and I met several who were rather enthusiastic about the idea. More than one seemed to enjoy taking on the mission of helping me get recognition, and to each of them I am very grateful. While I wasn't sure my plan would succeed, I was impressed with the quality of players I had met so far. Almost all were friendly and harbored great love for the game. I believe they had fun playing with my cards more because they liked **Magic** in any form than because of any inherent merits of my design. I became convinced that the vast majority of players, especially those on the pro tour, are friendly, quality people.

Saturday started off better than Friday. A significant number of players had been eliminated and were free to try my cards between side events. It was also on this day that I played my trump. You see, my undergraduate years at Cornell overlapped those of Dave Price and Chris Pikula. I'd played **Magic** with them in the "good old days," and even beat one of them once. I emailed Dave before leaving for Chicago and informed him of my plans. On Saturday I found him between rounds, and he introduced me to Randy Buehler with a kind word of praise. Randy was very friendly, but he, too, had reservations about looking at my cards because of legal concerns.

In the early afternoon I approached the not-very-thorny Rosewater for round two. He held his ground on the basis that very bad things might happen to him if he looked, because there are serious legal issues if someone claims he stole their ideas. I pressed only gently, trying to take a considerate attitude, not wanting to become a pest. In the end, he gave me a sliver of hope by promising to ask a lawyer who just happened to be on hand at this event.

Near the end of the day, my informants lifted my spirits with news that judges and other Wizards employees were having the occasional conversation about my little stunt. While this was a good sign, I didn't feel that I was going to get anyone to really evaluate my abilities. I knew it would take perseverance to get through, but I really wasn't very hopeful with only one day remaining.

Sunday morning I had a good deal of interest, and by noon I was behind in resorting used cards into booster packs. On Friday I had received a lot of blank stares and quick queries as to whether I was exhibiting *Legions* cards, followed by disinterest upon hearing otherwise. Just two days later, I had generated a constant flow of interested players, and compiled several pages of notes, including advice from the likes of Alex Shvartsman and Zvi Mowshowitz.

As the main event ended, (the one Kai Budde won. Okay, *one* of the ones Kai Budde won.) I began to look around for everyone's favorite designer. Because he'd commented more than once about how busy he was, I thought it best to approach him one last time, only after most of his officiating duties

were finished. I found him easily, but I couldn't think of any more pleas, and there was nothing to do but simply ask one more time. To my delight, Mark said the lawyer had given him the go ahead to peruse my wares. As I led him toward my little kingdom, he explained that he told the lawyer there are two kinds of people who approach him with card ideas. The first type are protective of their ideas, believing them to be valuable intellectual property. These people want Mark to sign something promising he won't steal their ideas; some even come bearing just such a legal document. I suppose that's fine if you just want to sell some IP, but Mark won't ever be seeing your work that way. The second type are willing to give up their first-born child if Mark would just give them some advice or evaluate their skill. These know that it's the *ability* to generate ideas which gets you a job, not the ideas in particular. Once the lawyer was convinced I was of the second type, she gave the okay. Mark really had little incentive to sort through my junk, but maybe I'd generated enough hype to make him curious. In any case, he took a seat and began to flip through the cards.

About five cards into the first stack, Mark paused to ask me what I wanted to get out of this. I started off asking for his advice on how to be a better designer, but while speaking that sentence, my brain was urging me to ask for a job. I already had his attention, so it was past the point of putting him off by pitching myself as a prospective employee. So I gave my second goal of impressing upon him my talents in hopes of becoming a Wizard of the Coast myself. I was very anxious, as you can imagine, as he sorted through the piles. He spent far more time than I deserved, and at the time I thought it was maybe only to be sure I couldn't claim he hadn't seen enough.

Looking back through my notes, I think he gave mostly the standard tips. Despite reading all of his articles, I had still made enough of the classic mistakes. It's one thing to make a dozen good, elegant cards, but an entire set of 300 stretches your limits if you've never done it before. After more than half an hour, Mark took a breath and delivered his overall opinion. While he wasn't impressed with any of my cards in particular, he thought I had talent. He saw me exploring many directions that **Magic** R&D had tried in the past. Mark reinforced this praise by saying that he has rarely given a better review to a fan that had made up cards on their own. To me this was extraordinarily good news. It was confirmation that making **Magic** cards was not beyond me. More specifically, I knew my goal was accomplished – Mark recognized me as someone with potential. He made it clear that there was no job open in R&D at the time, but I should contact him when I got back. I was so excited that I don't remember much of the return trip, and I sent him an email as soon as I reached home.

The reply I got was from Randy Buehler and it was far more than I could have hoped for: "we'd like to have you



contribute to our 'Tomato' design team, which is about to start up, by e-mailing card ideas and set construction ideas back and forth with us." There are certain sentences you don't expect to hear during your lifetime, and even though I thought I'd impressed Rosewater a little bit, the result seemed to be more than I could have asked for. Randy made it clear that they had no openings, and that I wasn't likely to get a job, but they wanted to try infusing this expansion with some fresh ideas. Can you believe they even paid me? It wasn't much, but it made this whole crazy adventure seem more real.

After faxing in a Non-Disclosure Agreement, I was sent files detailing all of the *Mirrodin* and *Darksteel* cards. The burden of not revealing that information to my friends was nearly crushing, and I've now got a new appreciation of how much all members of the **Magic** team must always be bursting with the desire to tell all of you what exciting things they've come up with for upcoming sets.

The very next day, Mark sent out his first e-mail to the design team. I have never before had so much fun doing something that's considered "work." Not to say this doesn't take a lot of time and energy, just that I loved to do it. I'd heard the saying, "I love my job" many times before in books, movies, and from friends and family, but I didn't really understand how anyone could totally enjoy trudging through work day in and day out. Turns out you just need an occupation that suits you perfectly. I couldn't stop thinking about this job. I carried a notepad with me everywhere, and even slept with it next to my bed for 3 months, so that I could write down an idea at any time.

I can't tell you everything about the process. It's all hush-hush you know, but surely they'll let me share at least a couple things from behind-the-scenes. At one point we were seeking out a new mechanic for colored spells, and Randy and Aaron discussed a few possibilities, including the infamous "colorless spells" idea. They gave this concept serious consideration, pointing out the pros and cons of doing them in the current block, as well as for doing them sometime in the future. I can't tell you the result of those discussions, but I found it interesting that the designers of **Magic** are very open to even the craziest of ideas. They didn't dismiss anything instantly as "too wacky" or "too lame." They've learned that even if an idea seems bad at first, you can often create a good idea out of its ashes, and that quashing creativity isn't going to get anyone anywhere.

Further proof of their skill was revealed when it came time to design some red direct-damage spells. Mark unloaded a dozen solid ideas in a single email. It seems to be one area where he's quite practiced at filling in gaps. I was a little disappointed, though, because red has long been my favorite color (it's not a strong bias, but you've got to have some preference, right?). In the end I think more of my successful ideas were black or white... but it's not as easy to tell as you might think.

That brings up the next point I hadn't expected going in: for 75% or more of the cards no one person can really claim ownership of design. It was amazing to me how most cards are changed over and over (and over) again by everyone who works on the set. That said though, I need to stress that Mark designs a *lot* of magic cards. He's almost shockingly prolific, blasting out the ideas like bolts of lightning and burning rubber around the mountain pass of **Magic**, as it were.

About a month in, I got another amazing opportunity, as I'd be visiting the Seattle area. When I told Mark I'd be in town, he agreed to give me a little tour and organized some playtest time so I could try out the fruits of our labor firsthand.

On the first of two days, I found myself at the Wizards of the Coast building 45 minutes early (I borrowed my friend's car), so I drove around the area for a while, trying to calm down. Walking into their lobby was a real treat – there are several life size statues of **Magic** creatures including Dakkon Blackblade, a giant Shivan Dragon hanging from the ceiling at the main entrance, plus half a dozen goblins. The main office space is more or less normal, though very open. When I saw an empty desk, I suddenly wished I'd brought a lock and chain or some handcuffs so that I might make it difficult for them to remove me. It was great to see everything in person, and to have the chance to get some work done on the card database directly. Oh, and you should know that while they *do* have lots of older cards lying around, they don't have a giant stash of betas or anything nearly so valuable. (Or at least, if they do, they were smart enough to hide it from me.)



In just a week after I got home, our work was done, and it was time to hand the set over to development. I was a little sad to return to life outside the black border, but I knew I'd done a respectable job, and had a wonderful time in the process. Little did I realize how much anticipation I'd have for the set to be released a whole year later. It's finally here, and if you have half as much fun playing with *Fifth Dawn* as I had helping to design it, it'll be one of the most beloved expansions ever. I know it's my favorite!