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# Gimme a Break

## The rules about rule breaking



Mark Rosewater · Making Magic  
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I thought I'd use my column today to address the following letter:

Dear Maro,

Your column tends to have several recurring themes. Two of which are as follows:

1. Proper Magic design requires a strict set of rules. The health of the game depends on the designers sticking to them.
2. Magic's success is owed to its constant evolution and willingness to break its own rules.

Don't those two rules contradict one another? Huh, Mr. Lead Designer?

Care to explain that?!

Sincerely,

Mark Rosewater

P.S. I apologize for the harsh tone but I figured it would spice up the column. No hard feelings.

Well Mark,

Let me see if I can explain why those two rules don't actually contradict.

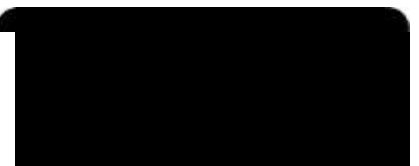
## When Rules Collide (Or Not)

So how can Magic design have strict rules yet still allow rule breaking? Simple, there are rules for rule breaking. Didn't see that one coming, did you? Today, I'm going to share the rules about rule breaking.

## Rule #1 – Rules Should Be Broken Only When A Card Demands It

One of the most common misconceptions about rule breaking in design is that we use rule breaking as a means to generate cards. I think a lot of players think we sit around thumbing through the Comprehensive Rules going, "Hey rule 301.15 hasn't been broken yet!" (I just made up that number by the way, so please don't write in saying hey, Card X and Y break rule 301.15. I have no idea what 301.15 is. Why didn't I look it up? Because I instead wasted the time writing this parenthetical aside.)

Rule breaking does not generate cards, rather cards generate rule breaking. What do I mean by that? In order for us to even consider breaking a rule, we have to first have a card that seems cool and feels right yet somehow still breaks a rule. As an example, let's take Fifth Dawn's Relentless Rats (despite Adrian Sullivan's



[hint](#) that I designed the card, the Rats were actually the work of Brian Tinsman). When Brian created the Rats, he wasn't thinking about what kind of card could break the four card limit. Instead, he was trying to come up with a new version of **Plague Rats**.

As Brian worked on the card, he started feeling that it was missing something. How could you recreate the feel of the early Plague Rat decks if you could only have four? (The early Plague Rat decks preceded the little "only four in a deck" rule.) So Brian let the card break the rule. The rule breaking was a product of the Rat's creation. In order for it to exist, it needed to stretch itself beyond the normal constraints of the game.

## Rule #2 – Broken Rules Have To Feel Natural

By this, I mean that we only break a rule when the rule breaking doesn't feel jarring. The idea behind breaking the rules isn't shock value. It's to allow a card that feels right to exist even if technically it's doing something it shouldn't. For this example, let's take a look at **Scourge's Form of the Dragon** (also designed by Brian Tinsman – he does love breaking them rules).



*Breaking rules is fine, if it's for the right reasons.*

One of **Form of the Dragon's** abilities is essentially a **Moat** (you can only be attacked by flying creatures). **Moat** is definitely not a red ability. Red isn't defensive. But if you step back look at the card as a whole, you see that the **Moat** fits into a larger theme. That of being turned into a dragon. If you're a dragon, you can't be attacked by non-flying creatures.

Being turned into a dragon – now that's red. This is the reason we let **Form of the Dragon** get printed. Yeah, it technically gave red something it's not supposed to have, but the spell in a larger sense gave red something it is supposed to have.

## Rule #3 – Check The Reason For The Rule You're Breaking

One of my pet peeves is people who follow a rule so stringently that they start to turn against the reasoning for the rule's creation in the first place. My favorite example of this happened to me at college. I attended Boston University (the College of Communication for anyone who cares). As BU is in the heart of the city (my dorm was in Kenmore Square – Go Miles Standish!), there are guards inside the entrance of every dorm to make sure that only residents of the dorm enter the building.

To accomplish this, each resident is given a student ID that identifies them as someone who lives in the dorm. For the guards, this was a full-time job. As such, you saw the same guards again and again. One such guard was a man named Karl. Karl was a nice guy and over time he and I began getting to know another. Sometimes when I was bored, I'd even walk over to Karl's guard station to chat.



*Cards generate rule breaking, not vice versa*

One day, I enter the dorm and reach in my pocket for my ID. It wasn't there. I had accidentally left it in my room. But then I saw that Karl was on duty. Here's how the conversation went:

**Me:** Hi Karl.

**Karl:** Hi Mark.

**Me:** How's today been?

**Karl:** Pretty slow.

(I try to walk past.)

**Karl:** Wait. Where's your badge?

**Me:** I accidentally left it upstairs.

**Karl:** Then I can't let you in. Sorry.

**Me:** But you know I live here.

**Karl:** Yeah.

**Me:** And isn't the whole point of the guard stations to keep people that don't live here from getting in?

**Karl:** Yeah.

**Me:** But I live here. You know I live here. We talk every day.

**Karl:** So?

**Me:** So let me in. The only reason we have ID cards is because it's impossible for every guard to memorize every resident. The point isn't the ID card. The point is to keep people who don't live here from getting in.

**Karl:** (pause) But I really need an ID card. Can't your roommate bring it down?

**Me:** I don't have a roommate.

**Karl:** That's a toughie. I don't know what to do.

**Me:** How about this? Let me in!

**Karl:** I can't do that...

This conversation went on for thirty minutes. I solved the problem by convincing Karl that although I needed an ID card to enter, procedure didn't require one for a resident to sign a guest in. So how did I get in? I signed myself in as a guest.

Why do I bring this up? Because when we break a rule in **Magic** design it's importance for us to ask why the rule was created in the first place. In the case of **Relentless Rats**, we had to look at the four card limit. The rule exists because some cards are broken if allowed in high numbers. But not all cards. So as long as development tested the Rats in high numbers to make sure it wasn't degenerate, we knew it was safe to break the rule (well, as safe as development can ever be – the real world just has so many more playtesters.)

## Rule #4 – Breaking Rules Is A Test For the Future

When we do choose to break a rule, R&D tends to keep an eye on the card. The reason is twofold. First, rule breaking cards have a higher percentage chance of something going wrong. We broke a rule after all. Second, sometimes rule breaking cards demonstrate areas for future design. To use the **Relentless Rats** again, if the Rats prove popular but not troublesome, it increases the chances of R&D breaking the “four card limit” rule again.



Let me make a quick aside on a related issue I've gotten some letters on. In my column during Sorcery Week ("[Slow and Steady](#)") I made a point of stressing that some cards are sorceries because the rules don't want them to be instants. But then in *Fifth Dawn* we went and made **Vedalken Orrery**. That allows players to turn anything into an instant. If you certain spells couldn't be played as instants, how could we print **Vedalken Orrery**?

The answer is that there are certain spells we don't *want* to be instants not that they *can't*. The rules can handle anything being played at instant speed. But some spells are very confusing in how they function. It's one thing to make a card that enables any card to be played as an instant. It's another to make a card that every time it's played as an instant it causes confusion.

The reason I bring up **Vedalken Orrery** is because it's a perfect example of a rules breaking/rules testing card. Last paragraph, I state that the rules can handle any card being played at instant speed. I say that because to the best of my knowledge that's true. But I don't know that for

sure. I haven't tried to play every **Magic** card in existence at instant speed. But now that we've made **Vedalken Orrery**, someone will (and I don't mean one poor guy slaving away in his

basement with all 6000+ cards).

And you know what, maybe there is a card that breaks the rules at instant speed. And we would have never found it if we didn't print the Orrery. That is, if it exists. So, to all those Johnnies out there that want a challenge, see if you can find a non-land card that can't be played at instant speed. I dare you.

## #5 – Not Every Rule Can Be Broken

For some reason, many players feel “the game can break its own rules” equates with “any rule can be broken”. That's simply not true. The metaphor I'd like to use is the floor plans to my new house. With the expansion of our family (I had twins, my second and third children, four months ago for those that might not be regular readers), my wife and I purchased a presale. That's really talk for a house that they promise to build.

During our plans and specs meeting, we were given the floor plans. We were told that we if we wanted (and were willing to pay for it), we could remove any wall we wished. Well, not any wall. You see, some walls were shaded in. These are the bearing walls. These are the walls that hold the house up. These walls had to stay.

**Magic** has its “bearing” rules. There are some rules that cannot simply be removed. What are they? Unlike my builder, I'm going to be more coy. Design is more fun if all of you don't know what we can and can't do. The better to surprise you. Let's just say the “bearing” rules are there. And when we break a rule, you learn that it wasn't one of them. Unless all hell breaks loose and then perhaps it was.

## I Break For Rules

I hope today has given you a little better perspective on when and how R&D chooses to break a rule. As you can see, it's not as simple as it might first appear. And hey, sometimes, like *Fifth Dawn*, we go a little more rule-breaking crazy than normal.

Join me next week when I look in the myr.

Until then, may you break a rule with glee.

Mark Rosewater

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