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# Design 102



Mark Rosewater · Making Magic  
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A little over a year ago, I wrote an article called "[Design 101](#)" where I explained some of the most common mistakes made by rookie designers. I received so much positive e-mail about the column that I decided that one day I'd do a follow-up column. Guess what? Today's that day.

Before I begin, I want to remind you all that this article is for people who wish to design **Magic** for fun like we do here at Wizards. If you want to make cards we'd never make, have fun, but this column isn't for you. Also, I'm assuming you read the previous article, so if you haven't go [take a peek](#). Finally, I want to stress that while I'm giving you tips for your own designs, I am not currently allowed to look at unsolicited (that is anything where you send in ideas unprompted by Wizards of the Coast) designs. I understand that I've gotten special permission on a few rare exceptions (such as the incident mentioned in "[Dawn of a New Day](#)"), but never with e-mail. So please, share you're ideas with other **Magic** players as I unfortunately cannot look at them.



Last time I spent my column telling you what not to do. This time I thought I'd start from the other, more positive, side. Today's column is about things you should be doing if you want to become a good **Magic** designer.

## #1 – Know Magic History

In college, I majored in broadcast & film with a minor in screenwriting. My very first screenwriting class, you know what I did? I watched films. Why? Because an important part of understanding any art form (and yes, I consider screenwriting and card design to be art forms) is understanding how it works. There is no better way to do this than looking at what has been done before.

Before you start designing your own **Magic** cards, take some time to learn what **Magic** cards have already been designed. (**Magicthegathering.com** has some excellent resources to look at cards. [Click here](#).) With over seven thousand cards in existence, the designers have explored numerous facets of the game. Studying the cards will teach you several valuable things:

- a) **It will teach you what's been done.** Quite often when I look at new designs, I see cards we've already made (or very, very similar to cards we've made.) To build the future, you need to understand the past. Also, if you choose to put repeats in your set, and personally I think it's a good idea, use their old names. Yes, we often change the names when we repeat cards (most often to fit into the current set's flavor), but everyone assumes we know what we've done. That assumption isn't made for a rookie designer.
- b) **It will provide valuable templates.** If you want your **Magic** cards to feel like the real thing, you need to have them read like the real thing. How do you do this?

Copy existing cards. If existing cards don't do what you're doing, grab the closest thing you can find. Bad templates are another big thing that make cards feel amateurish.

**c) It will show you the lessons the designers have learned.** Everyone gets better with practice. Even the designers of the game. By studying the games history, you will see the lessons that we have learned. There is a valuable tool for an aspiring designer.

Authors read. Directors watch films. Artists visit museums. If you want to grow in your craft, you have to start by learning the basics. When you look at a card, ask yourself the following questions:

**a) What about this card is done well?** The reason one studies the classics is to see what the top artists have done in the past. When you look at a card, figure out what you enjoy about it. These qualities will be things you want to copy in your cards.

**b) What about the card is done poorly?** As the saying goes, "Failure is the ultimate teacher". In general, artists learn much more from their mistakes than they do from their successes. Figure out what you don't like about the card. Keep this in mind when you're working on your own cards.

**c) What other cards are like this one?** **Magic** design is very much about variation on a theme. Comparing similar cards will allow you to see the core of certain ideas. In addition, it's a means to watch the evolution of design.

**d) What doesn't this card do that you would like it to?** There is no better brainstorming tool for new cards than old cards. If you feel a card is missing something, consider how to turn this idea into a new card. Just remember not to overwhelm the card with too many mechanics. If you add something, often that means you'll want to remove something else.

**e) What is this card's history?** To learn the value of a card, you need to have an understanding of that card's history. Was it played in tournaments? A good way to learn this is to Google the card name along with the word "tournament". Was it popular? A good indication of this is to look at the card's secondary card price versus others of its rarity. Was it a Timmy card, a Johnny card or a Spike card, or a combination of the three? (See my "[Timmy, Johnny and Spike](#)" column is this doesn't make any sense.) This is a little harder to learn but I find it helpful to ask many different types of players you know their opinion of the card. As a designer, I always watch how my cards are used by the public. This helps me greatly in making other cards I want to aim at the same group.

They say that those who do not learn history are forced to repeat it. The same is true of **Magic** design. If you don't take the time to learn what has been done, you'll most likely create cards that already exist.

## #2 – Play Magic

Another important part of being a good designer is understanding the game. How do you do this? Play. Nothing helps a designer understand the game better than shuffling up and drawing a hand of seven cards. Next time you play, think about the following things:

**a) What about this particular game is fun?** The key to good design is making cards that other people want to play. If you find some aspect of the game you enjoy, start thinking about what makes it fun. This is an important first step.

**b) What about this particular game is not fun?** Is there anything in the current game that you don't enjoy? Figure out why. Then think about why it has to be that way. Or does it? Designers in **Magic** are constantly returning to old ideas. Most of that is shaving away the part that wasn't fun while maintaining the part that was.

**c) What is making this game tick?** Another valuable lesson that can be learned is figuring out what the designers are up to? How is the current set put together? What kind of play experience does it create? Just as studying cards can help, so too can



studying environments.

**d) Is there a card that you wish existed?** A good trick for making new cards is finding moments in a game where a particular ability (especially one that doesn't exist) would be good. Whenever you're losing, for example, try this little mental game. If you could design a card right now to dig yourself out of the hole, what would it be? The only rule is it has to be a card you think the current R&D team would print. (So no Ancestral for 4.)

Good design is about understanding what makes the game tick. There is no better way to learn this than by jumping in head first and playing.

### #3 – Design a *Lot* of Cards

In college, I took a class on short story writing. The teacher walked in the very first day and said, "There is one and only one way to get better at writing. Write. A lot. A *lot!*"

Card design is very similar. If you want to improve your skills, there is simply no better method than making a lot of cards. But here's the secret. A lot of the cards you make will suck. And I don't just mean in the beginning. This will always be true. I am currently the most prolific **Magic** card designer in R&D. I'm the lead **Magic** designer. And you know what? The vast majority of cards I create are junk. (There's a line that I know will be quoted out of context.) Understand that most of these junky cards never see the light of day. (Most. I made **Mudhole** after all.) Heck, most of them aren't seen by the rest of R&D. But they exist.

***The vast of majority of cards I create are junk. (There's a line that I know will be quoted out of context.)***

Why? Because creative endeavors are not black and white. And the creative process is best suited when an artist doesn't self-censor himself. Some bad cards turn out to be not so bad. Others act as stepping stones to better cards. In addition, looking at your failed attempts helps guide you in the right direction. With experience, you'll find that you lessen your percentage of bad cards (partly because you learn to internalize your bad cards and partly because you recognize your mistakes faster), but they never go away.

Design will lead to a lot of junk. But it is only by working through these cards that the true gems will be found. In addition, nothing will teach you the basics more than the repetition of design. So, you want to get better at design? Design. A lot. A *lot!*

### #4 – Know What You Want

Design actually begins before you start making cards. A good design has to know what it wants to be. Are you trying to make new cards to go in an existing deck? Are you trying to make a set like Wizards would make a set? Are you experimenting with a new mechanic to see how it would impact the game? If you do not understand what your design goals are, I guarantee you are handicapping yourself in your design.

A good exercise before you start design is to write a few paragraphs about what you hope to accomplish. This might sound silly, but, trust me, it will result in a much cleaner design.

### #5 - Play with the Cards

Okay, you've made some cards. You know what, you're not done yet. Before Henry Stern joined R&D, you know what he did? He built rockets. (Hmm, I guess that does kind of make him a rocket scientist.) Do you know what he (and his fellow engineers) did after they designed a rocket? They tested it. And tested it. And tested it. Creation is just the first part of the design process. Next you need to actually play it.

With experience, you will get a better sense of how cards on paper will play, but nothing takes the place of shuffling the card into a deck and playing it. I can't tell you how many times I had a card that I had to completely reevaluate after playing with it. Here are the most common lessons:

**a) The card doesn't work the way you think it does.** When you're creating a card, you're focused on many aspects. When you're playing, you're focused on using the card. That focus often brings gaping flaws to light.

**b) The card's power level is much different than you expect.** More often than

not, the card is more powerful than you think. Experience has shown me that designers tend to push their own mechanics. When they dabble in something they don't understand they usually end up with super-juiced cards. Other times though, the card proves worthless in actual play. If you've played with a card in three or more games and never played it, you might want to rethink it.

**c) The card needs additional text.** Games have a funny way of forcing you to see corner cases you might never have thought up by just looking at the card. And when these cases come up, you need to change the card to solve the problem. The net result of this effect is that most cards get wordier over time. (At least in design. Good templating can often save you text.)

**d) The card has a more elegant solution.** Another perk about playing with cards is that it gives you time to think about them. I often find that some of my best design ideas come up during playtest. I'm not exactly sure why, but I think it has to do with the fact that you're forcing a different part of your brain to think about the card which spurs your brain to make connections it might not usually make.

Thinking is an important part of design. But thinking alone will not perfect the card. If you have not played with a designed card, you do not yet truly understand it.

## #6 – Have Other People Play With The Cards

This one is very important. You know why? Because your cards are your babies. And it's very hard to call your own babies ugly. But other people, they have less problem pointing out ugly babies. In addition, other people come to the cards without any preconceptions (which means by the way, do not talk about your cards before you let others play with them – do not taint their perception). There are things about your cards that you will never be able to clearly see. This is why good playtesters are crucial.



Here's what to look for in a good playtester:

**a) Someone who knows how to play Magic.** If you have to teach someone how to play **Magic** in order to playtest your cards, you will not get much value back. If you want good feedback, you need players that already have a good understanding of the game.

**b) Someone who's willing to give you their honest opinion.** Good friends often make bad playtesters. They have an incentive to like your cards and, failing that, they have an incentive to lie to you about it. What you want is someone who is willing to point out your cards' flaws yet whose opinion you can trust when they tell you things they like.

**c) Someone who understands what they do and don't like.** The best playtesters are the ones that can explain why they don't like something (or why they do). Solving a design dilemma is much easier when you clearly understand the problem.

**d) Someone who has the time to playtest thoroughly.** Good playtests take time. Having players play once with your card will teach you something. But it pales in comparison to having a player that has played the same cards game after game.

**Magic's** play has a high variance. This means that the experience you have with a card one game could be radically different from another time. Thus, good playtesting requires numerous data points.

Your design is not a success until others (away from you) have had an opportunity to put the cards through their paces. Now, I have the luxury of having an entire development team to do my playtesting, but I think if you ask around, you'll find plenty of **Magic** players eager to try something new out. Just make sure you wait to use them until you're ready. (Burning good playtesters with premature versions of cards is a common rookie mistake.)

## #7 - Give a Set Time To Breathe

So you've made some cards, thought about them, played with them, watched others play with them. What next? Put the cards away. The final part of the design process is what I call the "breathing" time. Creative energies force you to become very intimate with your ideas. Once you are happy with your cards, you need to get some emotional distance from them. What you will find is that this time allows you to look at your cards with a fresh eye.

Good design is a lengthy process. In R&D we spend many, many months perfecting our designs. And we're the experts. Don't neglect the value of time. I'm always amazed how many good ideas I get about how to improve cards when I've stopped focusing on them.

## Time To Make the Donuts

There you go. The basics of **Magic** card design (or any artistic venture). If you're serious about design, please take all I've said in this column to heart. Many of my comments might sound silly or blatantly obvious, but I swear that they represent the most important elements of good design. Take each of the seven points above and really think about how it applies to your design work. If you take the time and energy to apply these principles to your design, I swear it will improve markedly.

Well, that's it for this week. Join me next week when I finally paint the town red.

Until then, may you make a baby that everyone else thinks is very cute.

Mark Rosewater



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