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# Putting the *Un* in Fun

Mark Rosewater · Making Magic  
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Welcome to *Unglued* Week! You have no idea how long I've waited to say that. (I think my desire for *Unhinged* Week won't be quite as long a wait.) As this is a design column and I was the lead designer – well, the entire design team – for *Unglued*, it seems only appropriate to tell the story of *Unglued's* design. So just sit right back and you'll hear a tale, a tale of a fateful trip. That started... oops, sorry *Gilligan's Island* flashback. But seriously (okay, not that seriously, this is the *Unglued* design story column after all), here is how *Unglued* came to be.



## Here Comes the *Un*

Once upon a time, there was a man named Joel Mick. Joel was one of the original East Coast playtesters from Philadelphia that helped Richard tune Alpha. Joel was on the design team for *Antiquities* and then was the co-lead designer (with Bill Rose) for *Mirage* and *Visions*. Like many of the East Coast crew, Joel decided to accept a job at Wizards of the Coast.

By the time I showed up at Wizards, Joel had become Lead **Magic** designer (a title I now share the honor of holding). And within a few years Joel transitioned from **Magic's** Lead Designer to **Magic's** Brand Manager. Having worked in R&D before joining the brand team, Joel had a unique perspective. One of the things Joel was aware of was how often R&D would design an interesting card that just couldn't be done in **Magic**. Not because the card didn't make sense but because it had a messy interaction with the rules. The example Joel liked to use was *Word of Command*. Everyone knew how it was supposed to work, but the rules always prevented it from working the way it was designed.

So one day, Joel and Bill Rose (Bill is also part of the Philadelphia crowd) were talking about the cards that slip through the cracks. And they came up with a wonderful idea. What if Wizards put out a non-tournament legal set? A set that could print all those cards that just didn't seem to have a place in "real" **Magic**? And they didn't have to stop at mechanics. The set could also explore moods and tones that would be inappropriate in a normal set. Something that would remind the public that Wizards of the Coast understood that **Magic** was more than just a tournament game. Joel and Bill thought it was a great idea. So Joel, **Magic's** Brand Manager, said to Bill, **Magic's** lead Designer, "Put someone on it."

## *Un* and Only

This all occurred in the summer of 1997. Back then, R&D only had five people working full-time on **Magic** (Bill Rose, William Jockusch, Mike Elliott, Henry Stern and myself). Scheduling allowed Bill to assign only one person to the task of designing this new set. This led to the following conversation (well, as best I can remember it):

**What if Wizards put out a non-tournament legal set?**

**Mark:** So what did you want to see me about?

**Bill:** Joel and I have been talking and we think we have a project right up your alley.

**Mark:** You've got me interested.

**Bill:** How would you like to design a **Magic** set with no rules?

**Mark:** What do you mean?

**Bill:** Imagine there was a set where you could break any rule you wanted to. In fact, imagine a set where every card had to break a rule. Where no card could not not break a rule. It would be non-tournament legal.

**Mark:** The cards aren't allowed in tournament play?

**Bill:** Exactly. And the set could have any kind of flavor. You're not restricted to the kinds of things we normally do. You could explore other genres. You can take a different tone. You could make fun of Magic. It could be anything you want. Well, except a normal **Magic** set. What do you think?

**Mark:** Are you messing with me? Because it's a cruel thing to give a child a piece of candy, a big piece, and then just rip it right away.

**Bill:** I'm serious. We need a casual-friendly, rule-breaking, open-ended-creative **Magic** set. So I thought of you. (pause.) Are you crying?

So I was given the assignment with the following specs:

- The set was non-tournament legal. (With a new color border to signify this fact.)
- I was not to include cards that we could put into a normal Magic set.
- The set had to appeal to casual players.
- It should have a mood and tone unlike a traditional Magic set.
- There had to be livestock represented (okay, that wasn't part of the spec, but it damn well should have been)

Everything else was left up to me. I was to take a few weeks and come up with a proposal. Oh, and since the department was a bit understaffed, I was the design team. And the development team. (The thought was how much development does a non-tournament legal set need?) Ready, set, go!

## **Un and Games**

I talk often in this column about how restrictions are an important tool in creativity. And while Joel and Bill had given me a few guidelines, the project was almost crushing in all the things it could be. Breaking rules that we normally choose not to break is a big category. **Magic** design is filled with cans of worms that we're told to put back on the shelf unopened. And now I was hunting worms. (Speaking of which, what do you use as bait to catch a worm?)

The trick I like to use when faced with a task this daunting is to find something to focus on. I think about other fields I'm familiar with to see if I can find something that captures a similar feel to what I might want. The day I tried this exercise I found my mind wandering to magic. No, not **Magic**. Magic.

You see, in my youth, I was a professional magician. And by professional, I mean I managed from time to time to get paid while performing magic tricks in front of small children, most often celebrating a birthday. The highlight of my magic career was when I was the fill-in magician for children's parties at the Ground Round restaurant. Now, I don't know if the Ground Round still exists, but in my day, it was a burger joint that served peanuts and popcorn and showed old movies (read: black and white) movies such "Our Gang" or "Laurel and Hardy"). You were even allowed to throw the peanut shells on the floor.

Some of you might find it odd that the highpoint of my magic career was a gig where young children were armed with small projectiles that they were allowed to litter the floor with. But, that was my challenge. If I could wow the kids with magic, they never thought to start hurling peanuts. If I ever got the teeniest bit boring though...

During this thought exercise, I didn't focus on my peanut-dodging performances but rather on my visits to the magic shop. It was always exciting stepping into the store to see what new tricks were available. The store was divided into sections. One of my favorites was the card section. (Hmm, magic cards, hmm.) Magic stores have decks that do everything. Svengali, stripper, rising card. But one day, I saw a deck I had never seen before. It merely said "Variety" on it.

Intrigued by the mystery pack, I asked to see it. As I pulled out the deck, I glimpsed the first card: a nine and a half of spades. Then came the red six of clubs. Then the double-sided queen of hearts. Then the card that was half a Jack of Diamonds and half a King of Diamonds. Then came the eleven of spades. Then the twelve. Card after card, the deck was a parody of a normal deck of cards. I, of course, bought the deck on sight.

The thing I remember most about seeing the variety deck for the first time was that I found it hilarious and I wasn't quite sure what to do with it. But very quickly I started getting ideas. I thought of neat twists I could add to different card tricks that would add a splash of humor. That was the key to the deck's success. The makers of the variety deck were peddling humor, but more important they were selling me potential. They were giving me tools to do things that I knew

I hadn't thought of yet but one day would. And the second that my memory hit that moment in time, I knew I had my hook for *Unglued*.

## Un in the Oven

In order to make my proposal I knew I needed to figure out several things. First, what kind of cards was the set going to have? Second, what kind of tone would the set have? And third, what innovations could I use to solve the first two problems?

Now that I had a real world item to focus on, it was time to start figuring out what kind of cards the set needed. Inspired by the variety deck, I wanted the set to be a hodgepodge of different types of items. What this required was a list. Category number one was the cards that inspired the project, the slush pile of rejected cards. *Unglued* was going to be the one set in **Magic** where the cards came first and the rules came second. As long as the players could figure out what was going on, I didn't care if the rules had issues. A good example of a card that survived the process because of this philosophy is **Goblin Bookie**. Everyone understands "reflip a coin or reroll a die", but if you start asking a rules manager how to alter effects mid-resolution, he or she might get a bit grumpy. Luckily the words "it's *Unglued*" acted as a Get-Out-Of-Rules-Jail-Free Card.



Category two was the cards that focused on aspects of the game that normal tournament **Magic** does not. The biggest subcategories of this category were the verbal cards, the knowledge cards and the physical cards. Verbal cards, such as **Censorship**, affected what you could and couldn't say. The knowledge cards, such as **Squirrel Farm**, required you to know something about **Magic** to work most effectively. The physical cards, such as **Volrath's Motion Sensor**, required a physical component.

Category three was the cards that required new equipment. For *Unglued*, I opted to use a standard six-sided die. I actually considered using additional sided dice (4, 8, 10, 12 and 20 for those non-roleplayers out there), but playtesting proved that six-sided dice provided plenty of design opportunities. Category four was the cards that existed mostly for entertainment. The most popular of this group was **Ashnod's Coupon**.

Category five were cards that enhanced other ways to play **Magic**. The top of this list was multi-player cards. Not the ones that we can do in normal **Magic**, but ones that actually reference terms like "teammate". In the end, I settled on having one cycle of team cards.

Category six were cards aimed at the more serious player. Yes, *Unglued* would have something for everyone. This meant I had to come up with cards that fit *Unglued's* criteria (cards that we were unwilling to put in a traditional set) yet would still be exciting to a tournament player. What was I to do? The answers came from two unlikely places.

## Hot Crossed Uns

In my early days at Wizards, I use to travel to any convention/expo/tournament they would send me to. As such, I had the golden opportunity to interact with many of our freelancers. You might know them better as our artists. One such artist was a man named Christopher Rush. You might recognize him from such cards as **Black Lotus**, **Rukh Egg**, and **Snow-covered Plains**. At the time Chris worked for Wizards, but I never had a chance to talk with him during our normal day-to-day activities. But at conventions, all that changed. At conventions, Chris and I used to talk.



It was at one of these conventions that Chris told me of an idea for a cool land variant. "Everyone knows what a land does," Chris said, "So let's take all that space and just use it for art."

I thought this was a cool idea. A very cool idea. But I was never in any position to help get them made. Well, that is until *Unglued* was dropped in my lap. Normal **Magic** wouldn't make these lands. And they would be popular to tournament players (I hypothesized at the time). Thus were born the *Unglued* lands. They turned out so well, we decided to put one in every booster pack.



The other tournament-friendly idea I got from Japan. You see, the average Japanese player loves **Magic**-related accessories. On my trips to Japan, I was always amazed at the huge variety of accessories available. One item in particular caught my eye. Instead of using glass beads or coins, many Japanese players used special cards to represent their tokens. Most often the card would have a beautiful piece of art representing the creature the token was supposed to represent.

As I thought about new types of cards for *Unglued*, I thought back to the Japanese token cards. Like the land, I decided to use the whole card frame for art. I also specifically did not name the tokens (well, on the card at least) to maximize what they could be used for. The "soldier" token could be a soldier or a knight or a townsfolk, etc.



**Have *Un*, Will Travel**

Once I started to figure out the types of cards the set wanted, I was able to move on to the second question. What would the set's tone be? I could tell you that I entertained many ideas and that after careful thought I arrived at the decision to make the set humor-based. Or I could just tell you the truth. It never dawned on me that there ever was another choice. Humor seemed like such a perfect companion to a set all about breaking the rules. And to be honest, my comedy writing muscles were starting to get itchy.

To a comedy writer, there's no greater sign of love than mercilessly mocking something. *Unglued* seem like a golden chance for me to parody the game that meant so much to me. To reinforce this idea, I codenamed the set the Wacky Expansion.

The third issue to be decided was how to bring about the first two issues. The key, I decided, was to build a philosophy that would be spread to every aspect of the product. And the philosophy was the following: **Magic** has a spectrum from casual play to serious play. *Unglued's* goal was to try and capture the casual end of the spectrum. To remind everyone that **Magic** doesn't have to be so hardcore competitive. To let everyone have some fun. I laid down a few rules for everyone working on the project:

- The main drive to *Unglued's* flavor was humor. With the exception of the few "serious" tournament cards, all the cards were supposed to make the audience laugh.
- There were no sacred cows. People were allowed to make fun of anything. Anything!
- Any part of the game was fair play. The mechanics. The names. The flavor text. The art. The legal text line. Nothing was off limits.
- Every card should have as much humor crammed into it as humanly possible. (For a guide on some of the jokes you might have missed, check out [my feature article](#).)
- The humor should be focused on the game itself. The vast majority of the jokes had to be about some aspect of Magic.

Everyone involved seemed very excited by the project. And everyone got quickly into the spirit of the set.

## Band on the *Un*

I knew up front that *Unglued* was not going to be designed like a normal set. The cards had to be thought of in a much more holistic way. Each card had an overall flavor that all the pieces had to work together to communicate. This meant that we had to understand the overall sense of the card before I started designing the mechanics. The key I realized would be figuring out the visuals.

So I called a meeting of all the visual-minded people I could think of. The task was to brainstorm interesting visuals we could use on different cards. Most of the odd visuals in the set came from this brainstorming meeting. For example, learning that I could have art that crosses over from one card to another led me to create **BFM**.



It was also this meeting where graphic designer Dan Gelon expressed his desire to reinforce the "breaking the rules" flavor by having most of the art break out of the frames. "If we're breaking rules, why not start with the one that keeps the art locked in its frame?"

This idea would go on to be one of the core visual trademarks of the set.

## The Flying *Un*



With the visuals well under way, I sat down to begin the design. What quickly became apparent was that I had mechanics from all over the place (besides searching through the R&D reject pile, I asked all interested parties to send me card ideas – once again everyone seemed interested in dipping their toe into the project) making the set feel disjointed. The set had a constant tone, but it lacked a theme.

I dug deep into my comedy psyche to find something that would give the set the irreverence I was shooting for. The answer came in the form of a chicken. It all started with the card **Fowl Play**. I wanted to create a creature enchantment that turned normal creatures into something helpless. At first I thought about making it turn into a sheep, but **Magic** had already done that joke on the *Visions'* card **Ovinomancer**. For some reason I thought about making it a chicken and the name **Fowl Play** occurred to me. And that was that. I'm not a designer that can just walk away from a clever pun name. I'm talking real **Magic** (yes, **Apes of Rath** was all mine), so imagine the pull of such a name in a set that's supposed to be

making jokes out of everything.

The first chicken card led to the second. And then the third. At some point I rounded out the cycle and before I knew it I had my theme. Many months later I would be stopped in the hall by Joel. "Are chickens funny?" he asked me?

"A staple of comedy," I replied.

## The Prodigal Un

Another reason that I think *Unglued* is closer to my heart than other designs is that I was involved in every aspect of the set. Partly because I was the only R&D guy working on the set and partly because the proper execution of many of the jokes required that I guide along each aspect of the cards. This meant that I ran the names and flavor text teams and wrote all of the art descriptions. At each step along the way, I had to make sure that each piece was pulling its weight.

Once all the pieces were assembled, I handed off the material to Dan Gelon. Dan would then mock up the card and send me a printed version to make notes on. I would find a few places to add or tweak jokes and give it back to Dan. This back and forth would go on until we both felt we had maximized what the card could do.

Normally, R&D is out of the process long before the graphic people get involved. So to working with a graphic designer this late in the process was a real unique experience. After many weeks of back and forth, the set was done.

## The Un Never Stops

With the design and graphical layout out of the way, it came time to figure out how to market *Unglued*. During one brainstorming meeting, the idea of having a prerelease at Gen Con came up. I'm not quite sure why I volunteered to head judge the event dressed as a chicken, but suffice to say that all brainstorming came to an end after I uttered it. (*Unhinged*, incidentally, will be having a Release Event at Gen Con SoCal. And yes, I will be head judging it dressed in an appropriate costume – no, not a chicken).

I'm not sure if I could sum up the fun I had at the Prerelease. Instead, I'll just print my Top 10 Favorite quotes of the weekend.

Number 10 – "My opponent made me go get him a Sprite with **Ashnod's Coupon**, but they're out of Sprite. Does that mean the effect fizzles?"

Number 9 – "I'd tell you what I think of you but you

Censored a word I'd need."  
 Number 8 – "I don't understand. What did the Cheese do to get isolated?"  
 Number 7 – "I just don't find the lands that funny."  
 Number 6 – "Why won't this cow blow up?"  
 Number 5 – "We need a ruling. How much hokey pokey is enough?"  
 Number 4 – "Did you design this set just so you could build that deck and utterly humiliate me?"  
 Number 3 – "Excuse me, Mr. Head Judge Chicken Guy, is this the *Unglued* tournament?"  
 Number 2 – "You call that a cluck? I've heard better clucking from a chicken!"  
 Number 1 – "In response to your declaration of attack, I remove my pants."

And that, in a much abbreviated form, was my experience designing *Unglued*. If you haven't read [my feature article](#), I strongly urge you to take a peek.

Join me next week when I clean house.

Until then, may you take the time to laugh.

Mark Rosewater



*The infamous Rosewater chicken picture*

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