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Mark Rosewater · Making Magic
Monday, October 4, 2004



During my time on “Roseanne”, I picked up a number of interesting expressions that I brought along to R&D. One of the interesting expressions is “poking the bear”. It refers to when you do something that you know will rattle some portion of your audience. Here’s an example:

Me: Perhaps I should write another article about the high cost of entry to start playing Vintage.
Not Me: Mark, stop poking the bear.

But every other month or so, I feel compelled to write a “poke the bear” column. Not so much because I feel a great need to get a lot of letters, but more because it’s symptomatic of an emotional issue that seems worthy of discussing. So what is today’s “poke the bear” topic? R&D making changes that sacrifice some amount of flavor for mechanical gain. Or another way to look at it, why R&D changes things from the way they’ve always been.



Ch...Ch...Changes

What am I talking about? Here’s the list of items I’m going to talk about later in the column. Note that I’ve purposely included some early changes so that players can see how more established changes also had their detractors when the change was first made:

- adding a tap symbol
- removing “Mono” and “Poly” Artifact designators
- changing mana color words to mana symbols
- condensing creature types
- changing the basic land’s text box to a giant mana symbol
- changing “Summon Guy” to “Creature – Guy”
- changing creature types to a race/class system
- adding the Human creature type
- changing the Legend rule
- changing the Wall rule
- shifting the color pie

In each case, R&D made a change which certain players felt robbed **Magic** of some of its flavor. Today, I’m going to explain the major reasons we make changes of this kind and then walk through the individual reasons for each of the changes above.

“Does Your Bubble Gum Lose Its Flavor On The Bed Post Overnight?”

So why does R&D make changes that pull flavor from the game?

1. **The Changes Don’t Lose As Much Flavor As Players Think** – Let me just start out with simple denial. (Nothing pokes the bear like simply denying what they’re saying.) I think

- many people confuse details with the larger concept. For example, let's take the "summon" change. Many players complained that removing the word "summon" from creature cards took away one of the coolest aspects of the game, that the players are summoning forth mighty magical creatures to do battle with their adversary. My claim is that removing the word "summon" didn't take that away. Players still summon creatures. Everything about the flavor of the game implies this (and the introductory game flat out states it). While removing "summon" from the game made the connection less blunt, it didn't remove it from the game. Creature summoning doesn't have any less impact flavor-wise on players that started after the word "summon" went away. And as I've learned time and time again in writing classes, "less is often more". Implying something can be just as rich, if not more rich, than just bluntly stating it.
2. **The Game Has Flavor To Spare** – Another common complaint is that R&D is trying to slowly drain all of the flavor from the game. Let me counter this with three words: *Champions of Kamigawa*. Yes, R&D does things that sacrifice flavor, but you know what? **Magic** can handle it. Why? Because the game is dripping in flavor. **Magic** has so many tools (art, names, flavor text, rules text, etc.) to convey flavor, that giving away little bits to gain mechanical advantage is just a worthy trade.
 3. **R&D Doesn't Do It Lightly** – Now that I spent the last paragraph explaining why the game can handle it, I feel a need to explain that R&D still needs to be careful. Sacrificing any flavor is a big cost regardless of how much the game can handle. As such, R&D is actually very careful when making any of these changes. By the time all of you see a change we've spent months, and often years, coming to that decision.
 4. **Many Changes Actually Enhance Flavor** – This is a twist on denial. My claim is that some of the above changes *add* flavor to the game rather than remove it. The race/class system for example allows us to stuff even more flavor on a card. (I'll talk about this more below.) The point is that some items that players call out as flavor detractors are actually the opposite.
 5. **Today's Change Is Tomorrow's Flavor** – One of the reasons I've included some old changes is that I felt it was important to show how change evokes resistance. I don't believe many readers are going to be writing in clamoring for a return to Mono and Poly Artifacts, but I want readers to see how things that seem very natural to them were not always that way. In fact, if R&D decided tomorrow (and don't worry we won't) to return to Mono and Poly Artifacts, I would expect big resistance because people are used to the way things are. Now.
 6. **R&D Is Always Keeping Its Eye On The Big Picture** – One of my many themes is R&D's focus on the future. Yes, we have great appreciation for the past (and this gets expressed in many ways), but our greater allegiance is to the future of the game. It is our goal to make sure **Magic** becomes a classic. Not a current fad, but a staple game like **Monopoly** or **Scrabble**. Or if you want to talk core games, like **Diplomacy** or **Axis and Allies**. Or if you want to dream real big, like chess or backgammon. This means that we are always striving to push the game towards its ideal. Eleven years is a lot of history, but it's a drop in the bucket when you start thinking in terms of decades and centuries.

Case By Case

In some ways it's much easier to justify change as a larger concept. But complains are always about a specific change. Sure, the game needs some change, by why did R&D make this particular change?

Adding a tap symbol (Revised, aka Third Edition)

In Alpha, cards that had a tap ability simply said, "Tap THIS CARD to blah". Revised brought with it what could be argued as the most important tool for **Magic** templating, the colon. The colon did a remarkable thing. It separated the costs of an ability from the effect. This might not seem super important, but trust me, it was revolutionary. (I should point out that colon technology took years to evolve.) And yes, Alpha did have the colon, but only on mana activated abilities, not universally. Revised brought along the idea that tapping was a cost. As such, it needed to come before the colon. But spelling it out was wordy and awkward. Wasn't there an easier way to convey tapping? Perhaps a symbol.

When the tap symbol premiered, a number of players did not like it. Words, they claimed, had meaning. A slightly askew T (this was the early tap symbol – it was later changed to different versions of the arrow to make the game easier to translate) didn't mean anything. It was flavorless. Flash forward ten years. The tap symbol is now one of the key iconic symbols of the game. You can buy tee shirts with a tap symbol. It has gone from being flavorless to being flavorful. I think it's important to keep this transition in mind when you look at more current changes.

Removing Mono and Poly Artifact Designators (Revised)

In Alpha, there were numerous types of artifacts. Those with an activated ability were put into two classifications: Mono Artifact and Poly Artifact. Mono Artifacts could only be activated once per turn. Poly Artifacts though could be activated as many times as you had mana to spend. Revised put an end to these classifications as they were just a complicated way of saying “requires a tap” and “doesn't require a tap”.

The complaint at the time was that this was yet another change that took away some of the identity of the card types. By having Mono and Poly types, this group argued, artifacts had a different feel than any other type of card. Our defense at the time (and well, now too) is that artifacts still kept plenty to make them feel different (their layout, their generic mana, their flavor, etc.) but now they worked like all the other cards in the game. Consistency trumped the value of just being different.



Changing Mana Color Words to Mana Symbols (Revised)

In Alpha, **Llanowar Elves** read “Tap to add 1 green mana to your mana pool. This tap can be played as an interrupt.” Not only did the “Tap to” become a tap symbol, but “1 green mana” became a green mana symbol. This was done because there was a lot of confusion around the interaction between **Sleight of Mind** and cards that produced mana. Could **Sleight of Mind** make an Island produce black mana? To solve this problem (because R&D wanted the answer to be no), the words were changed to a symbol.

For some reason a number of players resented the mana symbols being used in the text box. I never quite understood why although I did miss the days of Sleighting the Elves (sort of a poor man's Bird). Like the tap symbol, some players at the time just preferred the words (which was even odder in this case as the mana symbols were already part of the game).

Condensing Creature Types (Ongoing, Starting In Earnest Around Mirage Block, Biggest Change Made In *Sixth Edition*)

During the *Mirage* block, we started realizing the potential of creature types as a game mechanic (this would obviously take years to come to full fruition in *Onslaught*). Ironically, the thing that started it all was birds. You see, back in the day every bird had the creature type of its particular species. Falcons were falcons and eagles were eagles. I really wanted to make a bird lord, but the game prevented me. Making a creature that gave falcons and eagles and pigeons and whippoorwills and blah and blah and blah +1/+1 seemed so inelegant. I simply wanted to grant birds +1/+1.



This made me realize something important. In trying to give each individual creature type flavor, we were robbing the collective groups of flavor. Goblins were cooler than the collective birds because the game gave you mechanical reasons to care about goblins. Goblins, for example, had a lord. Players played goblin decks. By keeping certain creatures separated, we were preventing them from ever having mechanical value. So we set about to change things. We, of course, started with the birds.

The biggest complaint is that we went too far. This is best exemplified by **Molder Slug** in *Mirrodin*. The card is creature type Beast. In the past, we had cards that were Slugs. Why wasn't **Molder Slug** a Slug? Here's where I throw you a curve ball. I agree. I think we've been a little too aggressive in condensing our creature types. And as the guy who oversees the Creative Team (the team that handles creature types) I'm even empowered to do something about it. I've instructed my team to loosen up a little on creature types. Let the occasional Slug exist. And

while we're at it, let's also make sure that every creature, and I mean every creature, gets a creature type. Heck, even make up individual single types from time to time (a la **Orgg** or **Lhurgoyf**). Note that this isn't a reversal to the past. *Onslaught* has demonstrated that tribal mechanics are quite popular. But from here forward, we are going to try and be more careful about how we condense creature types. And if we ever reprint **Frogmite**, it will be a frog!

Changing the Basic Land's Text Box to a Giant Mana Symbol (Portal, Sixth Edition – for tournament legal sets)

And now we get to a topic that has produced more mail than I ever thought possible. During *Portal* playtesting, we kept finding that new players got very confused by land. One, they didn't understand how they were different from spells. And two, the tap symbol completely befuddled them. (Note that no other card had a tap symbol.) So Jonathon Tweet (an R&D member that works mostly on **D&D**) came up with the idea of the giant mana symbol. We tested it and it worked like gangbusters. Thus, *Portal* lands got the giant mana symbol.

Flash forward to a year later. During a routine *Sixth Edition* consumer playtest, we found that players were having problems differentiating between lands and spells. This déjà vu prompted R&D to make a suggestion. Try the rest of the playtest with *Portal* lands. And guess what? They worked again. That's when we sat down and asked the obvious question, why didn't all **Magic** use the giant mana basic lands? When we studied all the data, the answer was obvious.

The more people we talked to the happier we got. The art director liked the change because it made the lands look much cleaner and it highlighted the mana symbols, one of the key iconic elements of the game. The Creative Team was happy because it gave focus to the basic lands to make them stand out from the rest of the cards. And the rules people liked the change because it made lands much more intuitive. The big mana symbol lands were added to *Sixth Edition* and in the expert sets starting with *Mercadian Masques*.

And then, as with each case before it, a subset of the players complained. The greatest complaint is they felt we were “dumbing down the game”. Before I continue, let me address this complaint. I think a lot of players don't understand the importance to them of **Magic** being as accessible to beginners as possible. **Magic**, at its heart, is a game about change. That means that it's very important to the game's health that new sets keep coming out. Why do new sets come out? Because Wizards of the Coast makes money from selling these sets. The larger the game's player base, the more money Wizards can justify spending on the game. If people start leaving the game without replacements, the game will become less and less financially stable, leading to fewer sets with less design and development time. Ultimately, if enough people leave, the game would cease to be printed.

The reverse is also true. The more people that play, the more extras that Wizards can fund. Higher revenue means more employees which lead to a higher quality product. In short, the more people that play **Magic** the better off **Magic** will be. And how do we get more players? By making the game accessible.

The other big complaint seemed to be that some players didn't like the look of the new basic lands. This is subjective so there's not much I can say other than general consensus in R&D (including, as I said, the art director) is that the basic lands look better. I wish I knew what to say to appease this crowd. The change really does do an important service to the game and I believe what we lose (assuming we lose anything, I personally feel this a gain) is more than made up for.

Changing “Summon Guy” to “Creature – Guy” (*Urza's Destiny*)

This is another change that seems to rile a small minority of players. The reason behind this change is quite simple. Up until this change, creatures were the only card type that did not mention its card type on the card. How did you know it was a creature? Because someone



explained to you that “Summon Blah” meant it was a creature. Not a great system. A better system? Just say it on the card like every other card type.

This change is used quite often as an example of how R&D is nibbling away at flavor. As I stated above, I don't think removing the word “summon” is lessening the flavor. It is making it a little less in your face. But if I have to choose which to make obvious, game mechanics or flavor, I have to side with game mechanics. Players won't stop playing if they don't get the flavor immediately (well, I shouldn't say none but far less than those that don't get how the rules work). In addition, while the card type isn't stated anywhere else, the flavor does have other elements of the card (like the art, name and flavor text) to convey the essence of summoning a spirit.

Changing Creature Types to a Race/Class System (*Mirrodin*)

All of the other changes in the article came from the design and development side of R&D. This change came from the Creative Team. It's ironic that the detractors of this change claim it's taking away something from the flavor of the game when it was created to enhance the flavor.

The reasons behind the change were fivefold. First, the old system was very awkward in that it treated creatures in two different manners. Some creatures were labeled by race while others were labeled by class. Over time, the Creative team found that they were starting to list race and class more and more. Second, it freed up some important naming space. Let's say you wanted to create an Elf Assassin. Under the old system, you would have to include Assassin in the name if you wanted to convey what he did, but with the race/class system, this is explained in the creature type line allowing the Creative Team more leeway when naming the card. Third, the new race/class system frees up the team to make more new creature types. With two types on all the humanoid cards, the Creative Team has the ability to rest familiarity on one creature type while exploring with the other.

Fourth, making everyone think about race/class helped a lot of the default race building that was going on. Usually when a card had a class type (soldier, cleric, wizard, etc.), the creature was human because there was no race determiner and human was the one race that wasn't spelled out (more on this in a second). By making the card concepters think about designation and allowing them to give races other than humans key classes, the race/class system indirectly helped spur more diversity. And fifth, it helps connect **Magic** to the other major fantasy game systems (**D&D**, **Everquest**, etc.) making the transition into **Magic** easier.

The biggest criticism I've heard on this change is that R&D changed something that didn't need changing. That it was unnecessary. I can only speak for the people whose job it is to add flavor for the game. We feel it is a great tool at enriching the game flavor while granting the Creative Team more options. This is another change that I believe if we tried to change back in ten years would meet great resistance.

Adding the human creature type (*Mirrodin*)



This was an offshoot of the race/class system, and probably the most controversial. If we're going to list races, how do we avoid humans? The reason the Creative Team suggested adding human was that it felt ridiculous that one race was absent on all race related cards. Why should **Extinction** be able to wipe out goblins and elves but not humans. It was inconsistency without a purpose.

Randy [asked](#) all of you about this in one of his columns and the majority of you seemed skittish about the human race. (That is the race that is humans.) I'm not sure what caused such a strong reaction. Perhaps because humans hit too close to home. Perhaps because humans don't feel as fantasy to some people. (A quick aside, I find this rationale kind of silly. Almost every major fantasy story has humans in it.) We did in fact look at other words, like Terran, but none captured the tone better than human.

In the end, R&D decided to follow one of our core beliefs: when in doubt label. The game can involve any mechanic or game distinction that bothers to identify itself. But it doesn't handle exclusion very

well. But R&D did compromise. We've decided that until the public is comfortable with the "human" race, we would keep from making cards that refer to it specifically. This is why, for instance, there's no Human Lord. One day there probably will be, but not in the near future.

Changing the Legend Rule (*Champions of Kamigawa*)

This change was an easy one for R&D to make. The old legend rule had two major problems. One, it created a creature type with rules baggage. And two, it was problematic for tournament play forcing R&D to be overly cautious with the type of legends we were willing to make. The new rule (created by Zvi Mowshowitz – see Aaron's [article](#) to hear the whole story) solves both problems.

But what problems does it create? One is the belief that it's a big blow to flavor. I don't buy this one. Neither system seems like it better lends itself to a flavorful answer. Yes, it's a different flavor, but different and less are not the same thing. Second, it messes slightly with the mechanics. *Unnatural Selection*, for example, loses a great deal of power. Third, it's change. And no one likes change.

I think with time, most people will come to like the new system better. The old version was very exclusionary. It caused cards to sit dead in your hand. The new rule is more dynamic. It always ensures that your legend has some purpose. It's a threat that can turn into an answer to an identical threat. And most importantly, it allows the designers to venture places that we would not before. One of the best examples would be *Isamaru, Hound of Konda*. Before the new rule, we would never have made an efficient legendary one drop. But with the new rules we can (and obviously did).

Changing the Wall Rule

This is the topic that actually got me to write this column. I was in an online chat already to let loose a few cool tidbits about *Unhinged*. But instead I was asked time after time about the change to walls. Clearly it had hit a nerve. The reasoning behind the wall change is similar to that of legends. Once we turned legends into legendary creatures, we realized that walls were now the only creature type with built-in rules baggage.

In addition, the Creative Team expressed a concern with the flavor of walls. Why is *Wall of Stone* a creature? Isn't it more of an artifact or land? Or possibly an enchantment? What it's not is a creature. The Creative Team likes their creatures to have a little sentience. Maybe a little movement. And most importantly, actually being alive. This isn't to say that walls can't be conceived that work. *Living Wall*, as an example, is a wall that felt alive. But when push comes to shove, the wall creature type is creatively sub-par.

In short, this change frees up R&D's ability to create more interesting and more flavorful cards. And remember, walls are still walls. Functionally, very little is changed. All walls still cannot attack. Sure it's a keyword now rather than a rule built into the creature type, but in practical play experience it should have next to no game impact. As with all of the changes above, it has granted R&D more flexibility, allowing us to give you a greater variety.



Shifting the Color Pie (Ongoing)

I left this for last because this seems to be the thing R&D is doing that most bothers the "flavor" crowd. **Magic** has built up a rich history, so changing an ability mid-stream is very disconcerting. But this was something R&D had to do. Why? Because the color pie was fundamentally broken. Blue and black took up over half the pie while white, red and green fought over scraps. An important part of shifting the color pie was to bring balance to the five colors.

In addition, over the years certain mechanics have drifted to places that flavorwise make no sense. Green was the third best artifact color while having the key philosophy that most abhorred artifacts. Shifting the color pie gave R&D a chance to reinvestigate what each color represents.

This is one change that I understand the response. It's hard to play the game for a while and always see a mechanic to appear in a certain color only to watch it just change colors one day. This is one of the major reasons why we've been taking the shift so slowly.

Finally, I believe that part of **Magic's** magic is that the game is always in flux. I feel this should also include the color pie. I believe part of the ebb and flow of the game is that different colors focus on different aspects from set to set and block to block.

I simply ask that you all have some faith for this change. I believe time will show that all our work on the color pie will have strong dividends in making **Magic** become a classic. And remember, nothing's set in stone. If something doesn't work, we're more than willing to move it back.

“Anybody Spare Some Change?”

As you can see, each decision was made for a very specific reason. To provide continuity. To make the game easier to understand. To give the Creative Team more tools to enrich the flavor. The list goes on and on. So next time you're faced with an R&D decision that rubs you the wrong way, take a moment to stop and think about why the change might be needed. This will give you a little taste of what it's like being R&D.

That's all for this week. Join me next week when I bring some Spirit to my column.

Until then, may you find time to give Change a hug, or at least a little embrace.

Mark Rosewater



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