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An Elegant Response



Mark Rosewater · Making Magic
Monday, November 1, 2004

An Elegant Response

Dear Mark Rosewater,

Regarding your article "Elegance":

*%&\$ YOU.

One of my favorites, not just of yours or even wizards.com. May the responses respect it.

Thank you.

--John Cataldo

Dear Mark Rosewater,

While I am normally a fan of your articles, this was a bit ridiculous. This was completely inelegant simply for the number of links. I kept clicking hoping that there was a point somewhere. Perhaps there was and I missed it. I thought it was an Unhinged joke. Apparently it was a joke, it was just a joke on your readers. Wow.

I don't read this for writing advice, I read it to learn about Magic design. I enjoy most of your wacky and off-beat columns, but this was just irritating. Stick to Magic with an occasional foray. If you get the urge to wander into the realm of introspective prose, do it on a personal webpage with the rest of us drudges.

Thanks!

Daniel Hill

MaRo,

First off, thank you. This was quite possibly my favorite article ever written. Normally I follow MaGo, for his hilarity and creative deck building. This, while not being as funny, which it shouldn't have been, was an insightful look at writing. Many people on the message boards, whom I'm sure you've heard, don't have the patience to understand this. I agree, this sort of article is most definitely not enjoyable for everyone, but it in no way "sucks". It takes a certain mindset to enjoy, and although I was a bit put off by the action of moving between the back button and the next link, the anticipation I had just before the next piece came up more than made up for it. An amazing piece of quality, and I enjoyed it probably as much as one hundred people did not.

Most sincerely,

Spencer Doehlert or That Which Squeaks

MAKING MAGIC



Elegance

Mark Rosewater

Saying a lot with a little space.

Dear Mark Rosewater,

Regarding your article "Elegance": To use your idea of less is more : Drivel.

If you wish to wax lyrical, please don't waste the time of the people who read your page because they play MTG. Go and perform a writing seminar somewhere.

This is the first time I have felt a need to write about how dreadful I though an article was, a shame it was one of yours as you are normally an interesting read.

Jason Partridge.

Dear Mr. Rosewater,

First, let me tell you how much I enjoyed this article. I often read your weekly articles, and was quite surprised to find that you used such a technique in this weeks'.

I appreciate the time that you have taken to put together something that, for me at least, was interesting in both style and substance (a hard find these days). I too am a writer (prose mostly), so I can appreciate the amount of time that this article must have taken.

I just wanted to say that it was a joy to read.

Sincerely,

Evan Gordon

Worst. Article. Ever.

Is that elegant enough for you? Terrible, atrocious, and I sure feel pain for those still on 56K modems. You're attempt at elegance just wound up "feeling" clunky, disconnected, and rather random & pointless. This is supposed to be a column about Magic: The Gathering R&D, not "Understanding English". Oi... this article is, truly, painful and annoying.

--Sheep

Dear Mark Rosewater,

Thank you very much.

In all honesty, when I started to read today's article my first thought was 'for crying out loud MaRo, what are you doing?!'.

Then I realised. You were once again writing an informative, intelligent, thought-provoking article.

In response to your questions:

(i)It was not an article that was easy to read, which decreased its entertainment value for me. However, the format did serve its purpose well, making me think about what each paragraph was saying.

(ii)It was very educational, and from now on when I write I will bear this article in mind.

I hope that upon reading the message boards you do not come to think of your article as a wasted effort, I think it is easily amongst the best you have written for this website.

I also would like to think that what you have written will permeate at least a small amount into the heads of all the people flaming you on the boards.

I am sad to think that the negative feedback will prevent you from trying to exercise our minds again.

Once more, thank you.

Ed Rial

(Manchester, UK)

Dear Mark Rosewater,

Regarding your article "Elegance": It would be nice if Wizards could provide an article of some sorts that could talk about designing Magic cards. Maybe something that could be written on a weekly basis.

It could be called "Making Magic" or something like ... oh, wait, it cannot be called "Making Magic" because your column about how to write "Poetry" is called that.

Anyway, it would be nice idea. If you know someone who has some influence on writing Magic cards or the content of magicthegathering.com, could you pass my request on to them, please?

Brad

Two weeks ago, I printed an article titled "[Elegance](#)". I'd take a peek at it if you haven't yet as today's column will be much more interesting if you know what I'm talking about.

The results of the article were interesting to say the least. The bulletin board thread had over three hundred posts (the average thread has less than fifty). It was about 9-1 against the article. I got about five hundred replies in my e-mail (the average column generates fifty to one hundred letters). It was about 7-3 in favor of the article. You need to understand that the thread traditionally skews negatively and my e-mail traditionally skews positively, but both pointed out two undeniable things. One, the column clearly evoked a strong reaction. And two, it was far from a unanimous one.

So what exactly was I up to? Why did I write "Elegance"? Once I wrote it, what prompted me to actually publish it? What in the world was it doing in a column about **Magic** design? And why was it so beloved and so behated (hey, I'm a writer, I can make up words)? Today's column will provide all these answers and more. And trust me before you leave today you will have an insight into a fundamental aspect of **Magic** design. (Although it might not always seem like it, all roads in the column really do lead back to **Magic** design.)

Beware the Ideas of Mark

I'm not sure how many of you out there have had the pleasure of writing a weekly column, but it's quite a challenge. The constant need for new material forces you to explore all sorts of nooks and crannies that you might not normally investigate. One of my tricks is to write down potential ideas and then wait for a good place to use them. My good ideas tend to come into two major groupings: topics I'm interested in talking about, and styles in which to do so.

As an example, I came up with the idea of using a "choose your own adventure" format as it played into the strength of doing an online column. But it took me six months to figure out a topic that took advantage of the structure. What would my reader want to become? Whose adventure would they choose? One day I got the idea about writing a day in my life as an R&D member and I realized that the two clicked perfectly. (If you have no idea what I'm talking about, check out "[A Day in the Life](#)".)

"Elegance" came about quite similarly. About a year ago, I came up with the idea of writing a short article in which every word was a link to another short article. After a little thought, I realized that a fifty-word article with links to fifty fifty-word articles would generate 2550 words, about average for my column. But for the life of me I didn't know what to do with it. So I shelved the idea to the back of my sub-conscious. But, as you will see, it didn't particularly want to stay there.

Yin, Meet Yang

Here was what intrigued me. The overall idea of a fifty-word column with fifty links each to a fifty-word column was insanely elegant. But the execution was about as inelegant as the concept was elegant. It was elegance intertwined with inelegance. Conceptually, (the very idea of intermixing elegance with inelegance) it was very, very cool. At the same time the means of navigating through the article was very, very clunky. I couldn't bring myself to subject my readers to the second part merely to get the first. Once again, I locked the idea away.

Then one day, the idea smacked me when I wasn't looking. What if the inelegance was a feature and not a bug? What if the inelegance served a purpose? This is when I realized that the structure demanded a particular topic – the topic of elegance itself. Just as I had put the fifty-word link idea on my short list, I'd also decided that I wanted to take a column to talk about elegance in **Magic** design.



Ironically, elegance is a very complex topic that I knew would be hard to properly explain. In particular is the idea that elegance in design is not one but two different things. There is an elegance of concept and an elegance of execution. While these two ideas might sound similar and intrinsically linked, they are not. I wanted to explain this, but I didn't know how. It's fundamental to **Magic** design yet horrendously complicated.

So I had an elegant & inelegant structure that really wanted to be about elegance. Why elegance? Because the inelegance of the structure with any other topic would be simply annoying. With the topic of elegance it would still be annoying, but it would serve two very important functions. One, it would be what we in writing call a demonstration by omission. It would make the point by demonstrating what happens without elegance. And two, it would be an ironic juxtaposition whose contrast would highlight the elegance in the article.

It would be educational and enlightening but possibly quite annoying. This is when I started having an inner dialogue with myself (as faithful readers are aware, I do this a lot.)

Pro: A fifty-word article with each word linking to a fifty-word article. How cool is that?

Con: You're going to make your readers click through fifty links?

Pro: Yeah.

Con: Do you know how annoying that's going to be?

Pro: But the contrast is the whole point. It's horribly inelegant. It demonstrates elegance by being inelegant.

Con: How about an article about elegance that's elegant?

Pro: Aha, but it *is* elegant. Conceptually.

Con: But not in execution.

Pro: Correct.

Con: So, basically you're making the **Ice Cauldron** of **Magic** articles?

Pro: I never thought of it that way.

Con: You're demonstrating a classic design dilemma.

Pro: I didn't think about way.

Con: No, no. You're demonstrating a classic design dilemma! That's good! Do you have any idea how hard it is to demonstrate the difference between elegance in concept and elegance in execution?

Pro: I suppose.

Con: Aren't you the one always pushing us to show and not just tell?

Pro: Yeah.

Con: This article by the core of its design stresses this conflict. A conflict that we've been wanting to talk about forever. And it doesn't just talk about it. It



demonstrates it in bright neon lights.

Pro: Wait a minute, aren't you **Con**?

I Love It When A Plan Comes Together

So why did I chose to publish “Elegance”? Because I knew that it could teach my readers more about **Magic** design than an entire column dedicated to the topic. It could hammer home a basic principle of **Magic** design in a way unlike any other.

But enough talk, let's dive into the meat of the column.

Last week I asked you if “Elegance” was elegant. The answer is yes and no. “Elegance” is very elegant conceptually. The idea behind it and the general structure is elegant. But “Elegance” is very inelegant in execution. In order to read it, you have to jump through a crazy number of annoying hoops. The experience of enjoying the article is completely warped by the means by which the article forces you to read it.

What does this have to do with **Magic** design? A lot. You see, when push comes to shove, my job is to make **Magic** cards that are interesting and fun to play. To do that, I have to use a full bag of tricks that play into what makes people enjoy things. One of the biggest tools is elegance. Elegant ideas are more aesthetically pleasing. They are simpler to understand. They convey a lot with a little. It goes a long way to making a design feel better. (For tips on how to be elegant, I refer you back to “Elegance”, – and yes, they all apply to **Magic** design. Really.)

Most people understand what elegance is. A vast majority even understand (or at least trust those that understand) its importance. But what very few people understand is that elegance isn't one thing. It's an approach to many things. It's a series of tools artists use to collapse ideas down to their essence. For the sake of simplicity, elegance falls into two major categories – elegance of concept and elegance of execution.

The elegance of concept is all about ideas. It's about the intangible. It's about emotion and perception and instinct. It's about making things that “feel right”.

The elegance of execution is about process. It's about finding the ways to do something efficiently. It's about brevity and focus and direction. It's about making things “work properly”.

The two types of elegance utilize completely different skill sets. But a good **Magic** designer needs to be able to do both. This means that he (or she) has to understand the difference between these two types of elegance.

One Thumb Up, One Thumb Down

Time to go off on a little tangent. I just want to jump in quickly to explain why I believe the response was so split. The answer is that different people respond better to different types of elegance. I believe there are three camps (be aware that this is a bit of a generalization):

Camp A – Values Elegance in Concept Over Elegance in Execution

This is the group that falls in love with ideas. These are the people that get great satisfaction over the beauty of a concept. As such, they are willing to trod through inelegant execution to get to an elegant concept because they value the concept so highly. This group appreciated the ironic juxtaposition because it's conceptually very cool. To this group, the column was a success.

Camp B – Values Elegance in Execution Over Elegance in Concept

This is the more practical group. This group wants the experience to be as enjoyable as possible. If the execution is inelegant, they never get to the point where they admire the concept. The execution gets in the way. Much of this group probably never made it through all the links. They gave up. The article couldn't possibly be worth the pain of reading it. To this group the column was an utter failure.

Camp C – Values Elegance in Concept Equally With Elegance of Execution

This group has a balance between the two. They are driven to admire the concept, but will not dismiss the execution to do so. This group appreciated the concept of the column but was still put off by all the links. They liked parts of it but not the whole. To this group, the column was a noble, but failed experiment.

As with any grouping, be aware that some people fall between the above groups. But, in general, these three responses were the ones I received.

Witness to an Execution

Whenever a designer sits down to design a card, his ultimate goal is a card that is elegant in both concept and execution. And sometimes, he pulls both off. Sometimes he pulls off just one. And sometimes, he pulls off neither. Let's examine:

Group #1 – Cards Elegant in Concept and Execution

This is the category that every designer wants their cards to end up in. A classic example of this category is **Time Walk**. The concept is amazingly strong. The wizard is using magic to warp time and thus gain an additional turn. The execution is very straight-forward. You see it, you get it, you love it. These are the kinds of cards that make designers happy.



Group #2 – Cards Elegant in Concept But Not In Execution

These are the cards that do something very cool, but are a bit clunky in some way – be it the rules associated with the card, the templating or just the mechanics concerning how the card functions. This is the **Ice Cauldron** category. At its core, **Ice Cauldron** is a neat concept. It's an artifact that lets you store spells on it to use later. But the card is so muddled in execution (mostly due to excessive wordiness and unnecessary mechanical complication), that many players give up long before they understand how to use it. Be aware that **Ice Cauldron** is the extreme of this category. There are many cards in **Magic** that put more weight on the concept than the execution. Few of them are as clunky as **Ice Cauldron**.

This category is the domain of Camp A. The Camp A crowd is willing to put up with a lot to get cool effects. It's important to note that as R&D's design technology improves we are finding ways to turn Group #2 cards into Group #1 cards. For example, several years back both **Mindslaver** and **Time Stop** would have fallen in this group (although at the other end of the spectrum than **Ice Cauldron**). But advances in templating have allowed us to adopt much shorter, cleaner templates.

Group #3 – Cards Elegant in Execution But Not Concept

These are the cards created to fill a function. There's nothing too exciting about them, but they get the job done. A fine example of this category would be **Creeping Mold**. The card is very efficient and elegant at doing its job, but when you start examining the core of its design, it's a bit ho hum. Why does it destroy these three particular card types? Who knows. Heck, who cares? You need some artifact, enchantment and/or land destruction, **Creeping Mold's** your card.



Camp B can see beauty in these kinds of cards as they appreciate functionality. Is the card mechanically useful and easy to understand? That's all Camp B needs. The biggest advance in this category in the last few years is the advancement of the Creative Team. Flavor, by tying things together and spelling out the card's creative concept, has proven to be an effective tool in giving normally bland cards a stronger sense of conceptual elegance.

Group #4 – Cards Lacking Elegance in Both Concept and Execution

I won't lie to you. These cards exist. But more because they have to than because we set out to create them. These cards normally come into being by falling through the cracks of design and development. R&D cannot focus on every card, and number of these duds sneak in every set.

The important lesson here is that cards can have different levels and types of elegance. And every type (well, save Group #4) has a champion.

A Dangerous Mind

I wrote "Elegance" with three major goals in mind:

1. **To share something special with my audience** – The topic of elegance is a very special one to me. As such, I put a lot of time into the article. (I was excited, by the way, of how many nuances were picked up by different readers.) In both quality of writing and relevance to **Magic** design, I consider it to be one of my top five columns of all time.
2. **I wanted to demonstrate the difference between the two types of elegance** – This contrast is much harder to understand without seeing it. By taking the two types to different extremes, I hoped to give you a concrete example of how they're different.
3. **I thought the article would be a valuable resource to allow each reader to see what type of elegance he or she values most** – It's easy for me to talk about the different camps of players. But forcing a reaction allowed me to let you learn something about yourselves.

And that my faithful readers is what I was up to. If you enjoyed it, I'm glad. If you didn't, well, I promise not do something like this for a little while. As always, I'm interested in feedback. Should I be making columns like "Elegance" that have a purpose other than simply being entertaining? Should the relevance to **Magic** always be more up front? Should I simply be kinder to readers with slower modems? If you have an opinion, please let me know. Your feedback does shape the future of this column.

Join me next week when I *finally* get to start talking about *Unhinged* design.

Until then, may you take time to give something a second opinion.

Mark Rosewater



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