

MAGICTHEGATHERING.COM

ARTICLES

- Related links
- Read other articles

TOURNAMENTS

MAGIC ONLINE

Article Search ▾

Un and Games

Mark Rosewater · Making Magic
 Monday, November 15, 2004



Welcome to Week Two of the *Unhinged* Previews. Before this week is out, - on Friday - *Unhinged* will finally go from being a wacky rumor to being actual cards. And then the next day – Saturday, I hope you knew that – will be the [worldwide release tournaments](#). There are many reasons for me to be excited to have the set release. One of them is that I'll finally be able to tell all sorts of fun stories about the designs of individual cards. But that is next week. By the way, before my column is over I'm also going to tell you about another opening in R&D for those of you out there that might call such an opportunity a “dream job”.



This week, I thought I'd continue my look at the “big picture” design of *Unhinged*. How exactly does a designer sit down and design a “break all the rules” set? Since I love irony, I'll let you in on the secret. You follow the rules. I'm not talking about normal **Magic** design rules (although most of those still matter), but rather rules for designing an *Un* set.

Organized Anarchy

Wait a minute. Aren't the *Un* sets all about breaking the rules? About embracing the taboo? About sticking it to the man? (Hey, wait a minute, aren't I the man?) Yes and no. You see, the *Un* sets do allow a great freedom in contrast to a normal set, but design fundamentally is about structure. And structure, my faithful readers, is about rules. So yes, the *Un* sets do have some rigid rules that design has to follow. And since this is a column about **Magic** card design (well, that and poetry), I thought I'd share with you what these rules are.

Rule #1 – *Un* Cards Cannot Be Appropriate for Normal *Magic*

I put this rule first because it's the most important one. One of the major reasons for doing the *Un* sets (apart from the fact that they rock) is that it gives us a chance to utilize dead design space. It lets us take cards that otherwise wouldn't see the light of day and put them to work. Because of this, the *Un* sets have a hard and fast rule: if a card could go into normal (and by that I mean black/white-bordered tournament legal cards) **Magic**, it's not welcome in the *Un* sets. Go home. You may not play in any reindeer games.



But wait, you think. (Yes, I'm a mind reader. So be careful. I heard that.) Aren't there cards in *Unglued* that could have gone in normal **Magic**? Probably. Okay, okay, you got me. Yes. There are some gray areas that the *Unglued* set plays around in, a few of which probably didn't cross the line. But for *Unhinged*, we actually did a pass where the rules manager (Paul Barclay at the time) looked through the set and tagged any cards he felt could work in normal **Magic**. The design team then explained why they felt the card couldn't be used in normal **Magic** or removed it from the set.

Didn't [last Wednesday's Magic Arcana](#) talk about cards from the *Unglued II* file that turned into normal **Magic** cards? It did. But that doesn't mean those cards were appropriate for normal **Magic** at the time. You see, I believe over time **Magic** is becoming more and more liberal as to what is allowable. This means that the *Un* sets are essentially experimental design groups with really extensive playtesting by the players themselves. Card ideas that have appeared in *Unglued* are slowly finding their way into normal **Magic**. With time, the same will be true with *Unhinged*.

Essentially what I'm saying is that the line between black-bordered world and silver-bordered world is a fuzzy one. But it's the job of the design team of any *Un* set to keep from crossing it based on the current state of the game.

Rule #2 – Cards Cannot Just Be Funny



In college, I managed and performed in an improv troupe (called Uncontrolled Substance for those of you out there that seem to creepily enjoy stockpiling as much personal knowledge about me as possible). One of the formats we used to perform was called "What If". The way it worked is that we asked the audience for a "what if" situation and then we performed a scene showing what the result would be. Usually multiple answers would be yelled out at once and the presenter would have the option of choosing the suggestion he or she thought would create the best scene. One of the cardinal rules when selecting a "what if" scenario is to

never pick something simply because it would get a laugh up front.

Did I just advise "avoiding the funny"? I did, but I didn't. ("Yes and no", "I did but I didn't" – could I be any less decisive?) My actual advice is "avoid the surface funny". Truly funny things have a depth to them. The funniest "what if" situation was always the subtle choice. (i.e. "What if dogs could fly?") The suggestions that made you chuckle up front (i.e. "What if pasta and anti-pasta met?") usually didn't lead to particularly funny scenes.

How this applies to *Un* design is this: don't put a card in the set simply because it makes you laugh the first time you see it. Cards have to have depth. Like any set, an *Un* card's primary goal is to play interestingly. Secondarily, it has to be funny. It is more important to us that you chuckle at it the eightieth time you play it than you laugh hard the first time you see it. If real estate is all about location, location, location, **Magic** design is all about depth of play, depth of play, depth of play.

This doesn't mean that we don't try to find cool cards that are also funny. *Unhinged* has plenty of cards that serve both purposes well. It's just that when push comes to shove function trumps form.

Rule #3 – The Humor Needs To Come From Within the Game

There are plenty of things in the world to make fun of. But *Unhinged* is a **Magic** set. This means that it has some responsibility to be funny to people who play **Magic**. The problem is that there is no one thing that links these people together. Well, except one. They like **Magic**. So, as the *Un* sets are a **Magic** product and they appeal to a group of people whose only common bond is a love for **Magic**, it seems pretty obvious that the humor needs to be centered on the game. Or the metagame. Add onto this the fact that our market research showed that the most popular part of *Unglued* was the in-**Magic** jokes and our goal seemed simple. Center the humor around the game.



This isn't to say that every joke is **Magic**-themed. There are a few hits at other targets, but more often than not *Unhinged* is about making **Magic** players laugh about **Magic**. And trust me, there are a lot of targets. A lot! (Some of which I'm not even responsible for.) Every facet of the game and metagame was fair target. And as you will see, we took no mercy on anyone. Not even you

guys. And especially not us. To quote my favorite book (Roger von Oech's *A Whack on the Side of the Head* – have you still not read it?): Sacred cows make great steaks.

In fact, one of the things I'm proudest about from this set (as a humor writer, not as a designer) is the quality and quantity of in-jokes that the set has. There are a number of jokes (a small minority, don't worry) that I put in that I doubt five percent of the audience will get. But I don't care because I know the five percent are going to laugh their, uh, donkeys off. And trust me, there will be at least one joke (not the same one for each person mind you) that you're not going to believe we did, but will find very, very funny. And yes, I expect to be getting some mail. Heck, I already have quite a bit and all people have seen so far is the ad campaign and a handful of preview cards. But it's worth it because I think *Unhinged* is going to be the funniest *Un* set yet. (Okay I only have one other to compete with, but I really liked the humor in *Unglued*.)

Rule #4 – The Humor Has to Seep Into Every Aspect of the Product

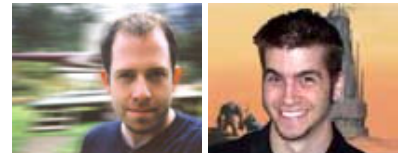
In comedy writing, there is something known as joke depth. It has to do with how many jokes are packed into a single moment or bit. The best example of this is *The Simpsons*, where while a joke is going down, there are other jokes occurring in the background. The idea behind joke depth is that you are creating something that cannot be digested in a single viewing. You are creating a texture that will allow each new viewing to allow new jokes to come to the forefront.

Unglued had joke depth. There were so many jokes packed into every card that players could take months and sometimes years to see certain jokes. I wrote a column explaining many of the jokes of *Unglued* (“[Get It?](#)”) because I realized how many jokes sailed under people's radar. And *Unhinged* puts *Unglued* to shame in the joke depth department.

One of the rules I set up for every person working on the product no matter what they were doing was finding a way to add some fun into their part of the process. I wanted jokes woven into every aspect of the cards. Heck, every aspect of the product. And you know what, everyone got into the spirit of the set. I guarantee when you pull out your *Unhinged* cards a year from now, you'll be finding jokes you hadn't seen.

Rule #5 – The Cards Have to Work Holistically

I explained [last week](#) that two members of the four person design team for *Unhinged* were from the Creative Team. Why was that so important? Because *Un* design is not about putting together pieces. *Un* sets require each card to have all the elements working together. The name, the art, the flavor text is all as integral to the card as the mechanic. All of the pieces have to come together to be one single unit rather than pieces stuck together.



Another crucial part of this is card layout. In normal **Magic**, card layout is not particularly creative. Take the art and slap it in the frames. Take the text and slap it into the text box. But with *Unhinged*, the card layout is yet another extension of the card. The design team and Jeremy (**Magic's** art director) would work with the graphic designer (Brian Dumas) to finesse each card. The layout would go through multiple iterations each time with new notes on how to maximize the humor of the layout.

The true sign of a great *Un* design is that all the pieces feel as if this is the only card that they could go on. (And I'll be honest when I say that not every *Unhinged* card passes this test.) But when it all comes together, it is truly a thing of great beauty.

Rule #6 – Cards Can Break Only One Rule

One of the most important rules about writing I learned was the “one freebie” rule. The audience allows the writer to do one thing that they will buy into to no matter how insane it might seem. But, and this is the important part, you only get one. After that, everything has to make sense. You want to bring an infant alien to Earth with powers far beyond those of mortal men. (That's Superman for those of you that might not be up on your comic references.) Fine. He can fly, bend steel in his hands, look through walls. No problem. But let him change in a phone booth just once, and you start getting criticism. Why would he change in a tiny space with glass walls?

Once you establish your premise, the audience expects things to make logical sense within that world. *Un* design has a similar principle. You can break any rule you want, but once you do, the rest of the card has to make sense. You want to make a creature and give it a crazy ability, like

say super haste. More power to you, but make sure that the rest of the card is the kind of the thing you'd see in a normal set.

What's that? What's super haste? Oh, it's kind of like haste. But, you know, super. Super as in faster. Creatures with haste can attack the turn they're played. Well, a creature with super haste can attack the turn before you play it. Don't believe me? Would I make up an ability like super haste? Okay I would, but this time I'm being straight with you. [Click here](#) to see super haste in all its glory.



When you look at individual *Unhinged* cards, you'll see that each card is very focused on doing one odd mechanical thing. Now that thing might be very odd, but it will be only one thing.

Rule #7 – Stay True to Normal *Magic* Design Rules

I saved this for last because it's the rule that no one wants to believe. In the end, *Un* sets aren't really all that different from normal **Magic** sets. The parameters of what you can do are a little looser, but the *fundamentals* of how you put the set together are the same. The only real rule you can break is "don't do this because the rules guys are worried about it". Okay, and "kill this because there's no way we could fit it on the card/explain it." Plus "that's too silly/goofy/oddball/strange/assesque".

But seriously, all the design rules that apply to every other set pretty much apply to the *Un* sets as well. *Unhinged*, for example, pushes certain areas farther than normal, but in the end it still feels like a **Magic** set. And that, my faithful readers, is probably the most radical thing about *Unhinged* design.

Coming Soon

That's all I've got for today (well, except for the job info, but that's coming up). Join me next week when I dive into some design stories about actual *Unhinged* cards. I might even explain where the Gotcha mechanic came from.

Until then, may you remember that **Magic** at its core is just a really fun game.

Mark Rosewater

"I Had a Dream... Job"

Several months ago, we had a job offering open up in R&D (for a **Magic** Writer position). I mentioned it in my column and we had the largest number of applicants ever for a job here at Wizards of the Coast. So, it got me thinking (well, that and the scores and scores of letters I get every week) that maybe a few of our readers might want to get a job working in R&D. As such, I've decided to announce any TCG (Trading Card Games) R&D positions that open up.

Today's position is for an Associate Developer. This is a primarily non-**Magic** position that would work on the development of the many other trading card games we produce here at Wizards (currently that entails [Duel Masters](#), [G.I. Joe](#), [MLB Showdown](#), [Neopets](#), [Star Wars](#), and numerous future projects that are not public yet) You get to sit in "The Pit" (our name for the TCG R&D open area cubicle configuration) and you'll learn first hand how loud I am. And hey, free Nerf weaponry. What more could you ask for?

If you are interested in seeing if you have the proper skills for this job, please check out [the job listing](#). If this position doesn't seem like a good fit, keep your eye out for the next time I announce an opening.



[Discuss](#) on the message boards



[Respond](#) via email



[Mark Rosewater](#) archive

[WHAT'S NEW](#) [CORPORATE INFO](#) [WHERE TO BUY](#) [INTERNATIONAL](#) [SUPPORT](#) [SITEMAP](#) [PRODUCTS](#)

[© 1995-2005 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.](#)
[Wizards is headquartered in Renton, Washington, PO Box 707, Renton, WA 98057.](#)
[PRIVACY STATEMENT](#)