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Up and Down



Mark Rosewater · Making Magic
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I thought I'd leave the fun and wacky world of *Unhinged* this week (although I do have some more FAQ entries at the [end of the article](#)) to talk about a slightly more serious issue that's been itching to get out. Often in my e-mail I get letters that paraphrase as such:

Dear Mark,

I am a big fan of your design work/writing, but I have to tell you that I really didn't like card X/ column Y. I feel it was a waste of my money/time and to be honest, it really pissed me off. Don't do it again.

Yours truly,

A Fan

Usually, just a few letters away, I'll get the following e-mail:

Dear Mark,

*I am a big fan of your design work/ writing and I just felt I had to share with you that card X/Column Y is exactly why I like your work so much. It captured everything that I feels makes **Magic** so great. Keep designing cards/ writing articles like that.*

Yours truly,

A fan

Just so you don't think my ego gets too over-inflated, I also get plenty of letters like this:

Dear Mark,

*I despise your card design/ writing. You are the reason **Magic** is going downhill. Stop ruining **Magic**!*

Yours truly

Not a fan

This last letter isn't relevant to the topic today, but I did feel it important to stress that not every letter I receive bathes me with compliments.

Back to the topic at hand. How do I please so many different styles of **Magic** players/ people with my card design and column writing? The answer is with broad strokes. I don't aim to make everyone happy all of the time. Rather I aim to make everyone really happy some of the time. This means that I'm aware that some of what I do will upset certain segments of the player base. In today's column, I'm going to talk about this philosophy.

#1 – Why We Can't Make Everyone Happy All of the Time?

Magic's strength is its ability to be different games to different people. Thus, different players want different kinds of cards and content in my column. Now there is a narrow band of cards and column content that will make everyone happy, but it's not large enough to create 600+ cards or 50 columns a year worth of material. In design, we call cards that appeal to Timmy, Johnny and Spike a Hat Trick. (This is a hockey term where a single player scores three goals in the same

game.) A good example of a Hat Trick design would be **Verdant Force**. Timmy likes the big creature and counter generation. Johnny likes the combo potential of a creature that makes a token creature every turn. And Spike sees it as a good reanimation target. A more recent example would be **Mindslaver**. Timmy loves the coolness of the effect. Johnny likes it as a tool to do things he never could before. And Spike enjoys its raw power level and puzzle-making properties.



In my nine years of designing **Magic** cards, how many Hat Tricks have I designed? If I'm very generous in my evaluation (and I mean *very* generous), probably around fifty. That's less than six a year. Let's assume that each of the other **Magic** designers is as prolific as I am. That still only gets us to low middle double digits. Not the kind of thing you can build card designs around. So how do we keep so many different types of players happy? Easy, we tailor make cards for each group. We make sure to have Timmy, Johnny, and Spike cards in each set. In addition, we try to each of the hybrids, Timmy/Johnny, Timmy/Spike and Johnny/Spike. And, of course, a handful of Hat Tricks.

As far as my columns go, I have a similar dilemma. Many of the columns on **magicthegathering.com** are designed to appeal to a certain niche of **Magic** players. But Aaron and I have the two universal "how the game is made" columns. This means our reader bases cover the gamut of **Magic** players. Timmy, Johnny, and Spike are all interested in how the game is made. But they are each looking for different aspects to be highlighted. There are a few universally liked topics, such as card previews, but in general my audience's taste varies greatly. So I use the same trick in my column that I do in my card design. I mix it up to make sure that everyone occasionally gets a column that speaks to them. This is why, for instance, my tone, topics, and presentation vary so greatly.

#2 – Why Do We Purposefully Piss Players Off?

Well, we don't. Not purposefully. But when we make a card for a certain group, we don't worry if another group isn't going to like it. Even that's not completely true. We often push cards that we think will be disruptive to the tournament environment out of the hands of Spike. And we tend to push cards to rare that would feel would be "bombs" in limited. But the essential point is true. When we're designing a card for Timmy, we really don't give a lot of thought to what Johnny and Spike think. The card isn't for them. If they don't like it, that's okay. They were never meant to play it.

This brings us to the players' laments. That is common complaints players have with a card they do not like. Let me address a few of the most popular:

This card would be good if it just costed one or two less. Why wasn't it?

To understand this answer, you have to look at the set as a whole and not look at just any one card. Each set can only be so powerful. If each set was more powerful than the one that came before it, this "power inflation" would send the game spinning out of control. We want cards you bought last year or five years ago or ten years ago to have value and mean something in gameplay terms. This means we're dedicated to keeping the power level constant. The end result of this decision is that each set has so much power it's allowed to have. I like to think of it as points of power that can be distributed however we see fit. But once all the points of power have been distributed, you can't simply add more points. You have to shift them from somewhere else. So, yes, that card in question could cost less but only at the expense of another good card costing more.

How in the world can this card ever be useful?

Too many players make a fundamental mistake when they ask that question. Without realizing it, they are asking "How in the world can this card ever be useful to me in the games I play?" And often times, the answer is it cannot. But that doesn't mean it's not useful in any type of game. The card you discard as useless, might be good in Limited, or Block constructed, or Two-headed Giant, or Singleton Prismatic on *Magic Online*, or it's perfect for the N slot in Alphabet *Magic* (forty cards decks with fourteen basic lands and twenty six others cards starting with each letter of the English alphabet).



In addition, there's a small niche of players (a subsection of Johnny) that takes great pleasure in finding uses for cards that appear useless. One of my favorite decks of all time that I built involved killing my opponent with

Speaking of Singleton Prismatic...

a *Sorrow's Path*. (If you're unfamiliar with the card, check the link and you'll see I had my work cut out for me.) Finally, there is simply a need for some number of bad cards to allow novices the ability to learn and grow as a player. Learning a card like *Eternal Warrior* (or the modern equivalent *Vigilance*) is weak has been a useful learning tool for many players.

This card compares horribly to card X. Why did you make it?

Magic is a game of ebb and flow. I always describe it as a pendulum that R&D keeps pushing in different directions. This ever-changing quality means that at any one moment in time some aspect of the game are weaker or stronger than the norm. To encourage *Invasion's* multi-color play, for example we pulled back the power of counterspells. To help *Odyssey's* inherent card disadvantage we were more aggressive with the number and overall power level of cantrips. *Onslaught* was more cautious with creature destruction while *Mirrodin* dialed back the amount of global artifact sweepers.

Since the power level of any one aspect of the game goes up and down (so that's what the title means), that means that we'll often be printing cards that are weaker than versions that came before. But, that also means that we'll be printing other cards that are stronger. In the big picture though everything evens out. So why did we make "inferior version of card X"? Because the power level of that aspect of the game is lower currently when the card in question was printed.

Sometimes, the power level is lower by a strict comparison but higher when put into context. *Mirrodin* block, for example, could print a much lower level artifact destruction card that might be more powerful in the context of *Mirrodin* block. Take *Shatter* as an example. If *Mirrodin* had printed a 2 *Shatter* variant, it clearly would have been worse than *Shatter*, but could still be more powerful in *Mirrodin* than *Shatter* was in a low artifact environment.

"The card you discard as useless, might be good in Limited, or Block constructed, or Two-headed Giant, or Singleton Prismatic on Magic Online, or it's perfect for the N slot in Alphabet Magic."

This card does something that I don't believe should be part of the game. Why did you print it?

This question stems from the differences in why various players play. If your **Magic** experience is all about proving your skill through serious competition then coin flipping cards might seem to fight against the core of what you feel the game is about. And while that's true, the designers have to design cards for everybody's version of the game. And as *Unhinged* design has demonstrated the line between acceptable and unacceptable is very vague.

This card is useless in the current metagame. Why did you print it?

Once again, the real question being asked is "This card is useless in the metagame I'm playing. Why did you print it?" So, of course, the easy answer is that many cards weren't intended for your particular metagame. But I think the real answer goes a little deeper. As I talked about in my column "[Combo Platter](#)", R&D doesn't design the majority of the cards with a metagame in mind. You have to understand that when we sit down to design cards, we have no clue what the future metagame will be like. Even the FFL (the Future Future League that development created to have a sense of **Magic** a year out) hasn't begun yet. In fact, the majority of the cards in Standard at the time of design, won't be in the format when the set releases.

This means that design works by finding interesting themes to play with. Then to hedge our bets, we try numerous applications of the theme to give it the best chance of finding a foothold. But not every theme works out, and even in the themes that do, not every card works out. We you see a card that doesn't fit, it's a casualty of the process. And who knows, cards that seem out of pace today, may become powerful tomorrow when new cards are added to the environment.

You'll notice a common theme to the answer to each of these laments. One, the card is most likely going to make someone else happy or two, it's a casualty of the process to guarantee that everyone is happy. With rare exceptions, R&D does not set out to design cards that actively piss everyone off. Rather we make cards for a gamut of players knowing that one player's treasure is another player's trash.

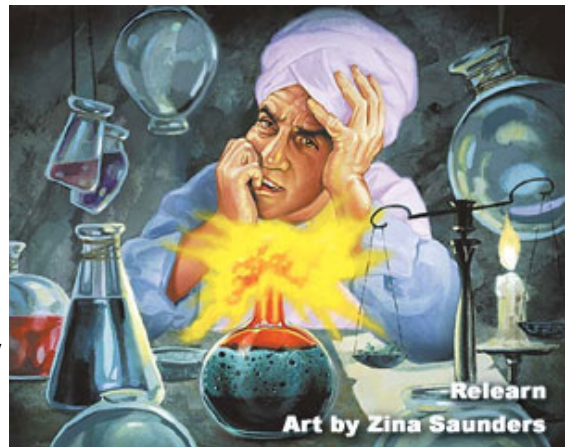
My columns are structured very similarly. I never set out to upset my readers. But I am aware that certain types of columns make some groups very happy and other very unhappy. So, I try to mix things up so each group gets enough of what it likes to make it through the weeks they don't. I never though write a column that I believe will upset the majority of my readers. If I don't think a significant portion of my audience will like something, I won't do it. But if I believe a small portion will dislike it, that won't keep me from making a column if I believe there is a large enough group that will really enjoy it.

#3 – How Will Knowing This Philosophy Help Me?

And thus, we get to the point of today's column. Why have I spent the entire column talking about how we end up making cards that people dislike? Because I believe if you understand the reasons for the cards' existence that it will make it easier to swallow. You may not like the cards, but at least you can understand their role in the big picture.

Speaking of the big picture, I thought for this last section, I'd attack this question from a much broader perspective. What makes **Magic** such a fun game? Now there are many valid answers to that question, but one of the most important answers is that the game constantly evolves. It keeps a constant sense of discovery as the players are always trying to figure out what makes it tick. And as soon as they do, the dance starts all over again. Sort of the reverse of a Greek mythological torture where the victim is forced to keep reliving a horrible incident (rolling a rock up a great hill, having his intestines torn out by buzzards, etc. – isn't Greek mythology fun?) **Magic** allows you to keep reliving the fun part of the game over and over.

But that puts a large task on the shoulders of R&D (sort of like Atlas shouldering the world on his shoulders to keep up the Greek mythological references). How can we constantly reinvent the game? Well, we pick areas that sound interesting, poke around a little, and then unleash them on



all of you. But as we venture into new areas of design space (and the ever-evolving aspect of **Magic** forces us to) we will unearth things that take more resources than design and development to completely understand.

This leaves design with a fork in the road. We can stay to the known areas of design and ensure that the metagame stays smooth or we can venture into virgin territory knowing that we will be unleashing things we don't always understand. The high highs come with low lows. But we've embraced this roller coaster philosophy because we know the thrill of the dip of the big hill will carry you through the loop de loops. And guess what? To some players the game is all about the loops de loops and not the big hill.

The moral of this column is that the things that make **Magic** so great also bring with them the things you dislike about the game. To embrace the first is to accept the second. And once you accept that, the second part isn't nearly so bad.

Enough With the Philosophizing

Okay, that's enough big picture talk for one week. Join me next week for a column unlike any I've ever done. Some of you should love it. Some will probably hate it. But hey, isn't that what "Making **Magic**" is all about?

Until then, may you see that your darkest flaw is your greatest attribute pushed too far.

Mark Rosewater

Happiness is a Warm *Un*

Here is this week's installment of additional questions for the [Unhinged FAQ\(TIWDAWCC\)](#).

Gotcha Cards

My native language is not English. The verbal Gotcha cards aren't fun because no one speaks in English and thus never triggers them. Can you help?

Yes, you have my official permission when playing with *Unhinged* in non-English speaking places to agree at the beginning of play what native words will be represented by the Gotcha cards. Obviously try to pick words with very similar meanings.

_____ (The Card With No Name)

If I change my _____ into a Swamp, can he tap for black mana?

Sadly no. It is the type "land" combined with subtype "swamp" that grants a card the ability to tap for black mana and _____ only changes his name not his type or subtype.

Avatar of Me

If I wear bigger shoes, to increase the Avatar's toughness?

No. The toughness is based off the size of the shoes you are wearing but rather what shoe size you are. So wearing larger (or for that matter smaller) shoes has no impact.



Curse of the Fire Penguin

I have a premium Curse of the Fire Penguin which I use to enchant a non-premium creature. Hypothetically, suppose I found a way to give all premium creatures +1/+1, is the card considered premium or non-premium?

This is *Unhinged* so we are not afraid of fractions. Thus the card is obviously half-premium which means it gets half of the bonus, + 1/2 / + 1/2.

Form of the Squirrel

What happens if the enchantment leaves play? Do I still lose if the squirrel token is destroyed?

Yes. The “lose the game” text is essentially built into the token. Once it comes into play you will lose when it leaves play.

Fraction Jackson

This card's name and flavor text imply he is a singular person. Why isn't he a legendary creature?

Because there isn't just one Fraction Jackson. There is a Golden Age version. There is a Silver Age version. There is the Modern Age version, of course. There is the African American version that showed up in the seventies when the Silver Age version was briefly incapacitated. There, is of course, the alien version that retroactively predated the Golden Age version. There is the female version that briefly wore the costume during the scandal of Secret Crisis Conflict. Well, you get the idea.



Ladies' Knight

The card has flying but the creature does not appear to be flying in the photo. What's up with that?

The knight rides a pegasus. You can see it parked at a meter in the background.

Punctuate

How is an ellipses (...) treated by Punctuate? It's not listed specifically in the reminder text so does an ellipse cause 0 damage, 1/2 damage or 1 1/2 damage?

This is a tricky one. Strictly speaking from an English standpoint an ellipses is one piece of punctuation. But on **Magic** cards, we lay out ellipses as three distinct periods. Also based on the fact that the reminder text lists periods but not ellipses, I am going to make the controversial ruling that for *Unhinged*, an ellipses is treated as three periods and thus does 1 1/2 damage for Punctuate.

R&D's Secret Lair

If I have an R&D's Secret Lair and a basic land in play with a giant mana symbol, is the land unable to produce mana because it doesn't say it on the card?

No, because *R&D's Secret Lair* merely removes errata. It doesn't change the rules of the game. And the rules of the game clearly state what basic lands are capable of.

Rod of Spanking

The FAQ mentions “spanking rules”. I cannot find them?

They are right next to the “sarcasm rules”.

Shoe Tree

Can a shoe be on more than one Shoe Tree?

No, counters are only allowed to be on one card.

The FAQ says I can bring extra shoes. Does that mean that I can put more than two shoe counters on a Shoe Tree?

No. The reason to bring extra shoes is so that you can play multiple Shoe Trees and have enough counters for them all.

S.N.O.T.

What happens if I put a S.N.O.T. of multiple pieces into a Time Machine?

For purposes of determining converted mana cost of a multiple piece S.N.O.T., combine the converted mana cost of all the pieces. For example, if a four-piece S.N.O.T. is put into a **Time Machine**, it would come into play on the fourth turn of the next game (Hey, a 16/16 on turn four is nothing to sneeze at.)



Stop That

Can you define "flick"?

You know that annoying thing that players do while holding their hand of cards where they flick them against one another. That's what the card's talking about.

Yet Another Aether Vortex

If you have a card that puts a card directly on top of the library (say Vampiric Tutor), is that card considered having "come into play" and thus trigger "comes into play" effects?

No, it is not. **Vampiric Tutor** isn't causing the card to come into play, the **Vortex** is and it doesn't care where the card came from before it causes it to be in play.

What happens if half of B.F.M. is put into play by the Vortex?

B.F.M. cannot exist without both halves, a silver-bordered state base effect (black bordered world doesn't have multi-card permanents) destroys it. The top card of your library would then flip up and if it's a permanent, it would be in play.



So I have a S.N.O.T. in play due to the Vortex. I attach a second S.N.O.T. to it. What happens when I draw my next card?

The original S.N.O.T. goes to your hand and the other S.N.O.T. goes to the graveyard for the same reason the half of the **B.F.M.** did in the question above.

If an Enchant World comes into play via a Vortex, what happens?

The same thing as if you played it. The **Enchant World** state-based effect doesn't care about whether or not it "came into play".

What happens if a card in play due to the Vortex phases out?

The card below it turns face up and is in play if a permanent. Then when the card phases back in it returns from whence it came, the top of your library. It will then cover up whatever card is currently on top of the library.



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