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Mark Rosewater · Making Magic
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About three or four times a year I like to do a mailbag column, where I address a number of issues that have come up in e-mail sent to me. Today is a mailbag column of sorts, but with a twist (I do so love my twists after all). Today, I'm planning to look at a second place I go to get feedback, the threads to my articles. For those unfamiliar with what I'm talking about, if you scroll down to the bottom of any of my columns you'll find, next to a picture of **Merchant Scroll**, the words "Discuss on the message boards." That link takes you to a bulletin board thread (on the wizards.com bulletin boards) that discusses the column in question.



The threads are different from the e-mail in two important ways. First, unlike the e-mails, the message isn't intended directly for me. A writer in a thread is talking to the group. This allows them to be much less (let's call it) "friendly" in their tone. If they don't like something, there's usually nothing holding them back from saying exactly what they feel. Two, the entire board experience is very intertwined with the sense of community that has evolved around **magicthegathering.com**; topics introduced by one person can be picked up by others, and soon entire discussions have been created. That never happens in e-mail. (Okay, seldom happens.)

As with my normal mailbag columns, I've chosen posts that either ask an intriguing question or allow me to talk about a topic I think you all will find interesting. Lastly, before we move on, I want to stress that while I don't post often, I do read the threads every week. If you want to catch my ear (and don't like sending a personal e-mail), the boards are a great place to state your case for what's wrong (or sometimes what's right) about current **Magic**.

Thread Dawn

I thought I'd begin today with the column that had one of the meatiest threads as far as "big issues". The column was called "[Up and Down](#)" and it hit upon one of my favorite topics, "Why does R&D make cards you don't like?"

As always, the topic spawned some interesting questions:

Quote:

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.

I think that this is a too easy answer that does not address the true problem behind the quoted question.

I think the true question is this: "Sometimes a good idea for an interesting tournament level card gets wasted: if the 'power points' for that set have already been distributed, why not save the card for another set instead of wasting it as an overcosted card?"

An example: [Glowrider](#).

That card is nothing more than a good ability wasted. It does not appeal Timmy (nothing flashy), nor Johnny (no combo potential), and its power level is too low for Spike: if its cost - instead of 2W - was WW, with that same ability it could be good for WW in Vintage (preventing combo from going off).

What are the chance of getting this ability again, this time properly costed? Next to none. Was not it better wait for another set instead of wasting it?

Greistal

Greistal,

You bring up a very common question. Why do we make interesting cards that suck? If we're forced to make some sub-par cards, why don't we just "fix" the boring ones? There are a number of reasons for this. Number one, **Magic** is a game about discovery. A great deal of the enjoyment from the game comes from trying to figure out which are the good cards and which are the bad ones. If the good and bad cards had any consistent quality, then that challenge wouldn't be as challenging. For example, let's say we only made innovative cards that we pushed. **Magic** players are a smart lot. It wouldn't take long before they would learn that any innovative card is good. We don't want that.

Second, I think you fall into a trap that young designers fall into. You see, when you first start designing **Magic** cards you get very attached to each individual card. You fight tooth and nail to make sure that each card you designed makes it into the set. And then you fight with developers to make sure that the cool cards you made don't end up getting weakened. But with time comes an important lesson. **Magic** has an insatiable appetite for new cards. If you have a cool idea, we'll do it eventually. And if it sucks this time, perhaps it will be better the next time we make it. Who says that the coolest execution of a concept has to be used the first time the card is made? One of the joys of design is finding cards that excited people but didn't quite work out and then come back with better versions. My personal example is [Duplicity](#) from *Tempest*. I loved the idea of a card that grants you two hands that you can swap between. The initial execution turned out to be less than stellar, so I waited for a while and then made an improved version (*Champions of Kamigawa's* [Moonring Mirror](#)). And maybe one day, I'll improve on it yet again. But if the best version had simply come out first, I'd forever be making weakened versions.



Third, "interesting" is very subjective. If R&D only pushed the small band of cards it finds interesting, we might be missing whole areas of space that would interesting to other players. By "spreading around the love" with our power points, we guarantee that many different types of players get good cards rather than just a certain segment.

Next, we have the opinion of a dwarf:

Overall, not a bad article. I agree with MaRo about people who look at certain cards and say, "Well, that card just sucks! Who would play with that?"

That happened a lot when I used to play real Magic (now I just mostly play online because I have a real job that takes up almost all my time). And, of course, someone would walk in with a deck that used that card and smashed the guy talking trash about it.

Anyway, the only element I disagree with (and unfortunately can't do anything about since I don't work at WotC) is the idea that R&D must purposefully make "bad" cards. I can forgive if there's a card that slips through the crack because they thought it was okay in the set, but overlooked another card with better interaction, but the idea that when I crack a pack of cards I have to have a card that no one wants and I'll never use (like **Vigilance** or **Eternal Warrior**) offends me. Why should I spend my hard-earned money, why should anybody spend their hard-earned money, on a product that is intentionally made with bad elements. Trust me, if there's anybody out there who needs a card like **Vigilance** or **Eternal Warrior** to make them a better player, then they're either

A: playing solitaire Magic, or

B: not getting good advice from other more experienced players.

In either case, I can't really see how intentionally making a bad card helps people with their deck building skill. Maybe that was true 7 years ago, before net-decking became popular. But now, if there's a noob player, he/she usually has the experience of someone who knows all the good deck list websites are to fall back on.

- Boris the Dwarf

Boris,

I believe your argument is based on a faulty assumption that all **Magic** players are anywhere close to your play skill level. We do a lot of focus testing and market research and I have to tell you, the reality of the situation is far, far away from where you imagine it. Cards like **Vigilance** and **Eternal Warrior** get played a lot. A lot! In fact, cards far worse than those cards get played. A lot! So much so that R&D has come to the conclusion that it is almost impossible to make a card that no one will play. We try and then our testing shows that someone plays it. And if it's really, really, really, bad, then the Johnnies start coming out of the woodwork trying to find a way to make the "bad" card win.

There are several reasons for this. One, many players are not connected into the larger **Magic** scene. That is, there are people out there who play with their friends around the kitchen table who don't read the net. Who don't go to tournaments and interact with other players. There only interaction is with one another. And technology in a vacuum goes slowly. Second, many players don't own all that many cards. Sure, Card X might be better than Card Y, but they don't have card X (they may not even know card X exists!), so they play with Card Y. Third, card evaluations are hard. There are tons of examples of the top pros evaluating a set and writing off what goes on to be the best card in the set. Both **Necropotence** (from *Ice Age*) and **Cursed Scroll** (from *Tempest*) are examples.

To sum up Boris, if our research showed that absolutely no one played cards of a certain caliber, we might re-evaluate our current stance. I suggest you take a peek next time you're at a game store or comic shop with casual players around and ask to see their decks. I would be shocked if you didn't eventually see a **Vigilance** in one of the decks.

Which leads into our next post:

*"With rare exceptions, R&D does not set out to design cards that actively **** everyone off."*

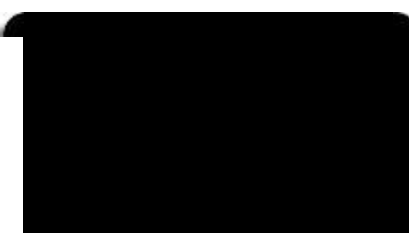
This line really intrigues me. Pleeeeease give us an example of a non-un card that you set out to design to **** everyone off. Fascinating.

Love
Jamie

PS: Hey! how come you're allowed to say that word but I'm not? Huh?

Jamie,

As I talked about above, R&D is aware that there is a subset of Johnny who really enjoys taking the absolute dregs and trying to make a deck out of it that works. I know, because I am one such Johnny. A deck that wins with **Sorrow's Path**? Been there. **Tunnel**? Done that. All five laces? Many, many times. As such, R&D likes to every once in a while try to make a card as bad as we can possibly can make one to give this subset a little run



for their money. We call these “super bad” cards. A good example of this card is **Sword of the Chosen** from *Stronghold*. The card is so bad that it inspired one of the funniest pieces of fan fiction I have ever seen explaining how the card was designed. We don't make these “super bad” cards often (although *Saviors of Kamigawa* does have one), but every once in a blue moon they're fun to print.

As to why I'm allowed to say words you can't, let me just quote Mel Brooks from *The History of the World, Part I*: “It's good to be king.”

And one last post from this column:

I think that Maro is pulling at strings to offer more explanations as to why bad cards are made. I'm kinda surprised that I'm the first one here to comment on this statement he made in the article:

Quote:

“Finally, there is simply a need for some number of bad cards to allow novices the ability to learn and grow as a player.” - Mark Rosewater

So now he says that they need to make bad cards so that novices can learn what bad cards are. Huh?!? They make bad cards on purpose as learning tools?!? That's kinda hard to swallow. I'm hoping he's trying to say that since there are inevitably bad cards made, at least they are useful in teaching players how to recognize bad cards. At least that would be a little easier to accept than thinking they made them on purpose to teach novices. Maybe I just misinterpreted his statement.

I enjoy all of Maro's articles (except the 50 links one) so I must be a combination Timmy/Johnny/Spike. I like seeing behind the scenes and learning all aspects of how the designers and developers create and think. That one statement I quoted though is a scary look into Maro's mind if that's truly how he feels about the creation of bad cards.

In any case, Rock On Mr. Rosewater. There isn't much about Magic that I don't like. So in my opinion you are all doing a great job.

- Dragonstab

Dragonstab,

I said what I mean. A very important part of any trading card game is that it allows each individual to grow as a player. I remember, for example, teaching my dad (yes, my dad plays **Magic**) some fundamentals. I explained to him why to use the **Prodigal Sorcerer's** ability at the end of the opponent's turn as it allowed Tim (the **Prodigal Sorcerer's** nickname) to serve as a threat for as long as possible. I could see the light bulb going on in my dad's head and he started to understand the ramifications of what the **Prodigal Sorcerer** lesson meant (and by the way, it's a big one). Those insights, whether learned or taught, are an exciting part of the game.

Like Boris above, I think you have a misunderstanding of how deep the level of play experience goes. There are players far, far worse than you. Worse than you probably believe could exist. But R&D knows they're there. They come scurrying out of the woodwork every time we do market research. Any card you consider bad is right now fooling someone. Many someones actually. And the day they learn that the card isn't as good as they think is going to be a joyous day for them. Everyone likes improving. And it's important to R&D that we provide every player with this opportunity.

Thread Bull

One of the interesting things about the threads is that certain voices are heard again and again. My next post comes from last week's column “[Ninja & Pirates & Myrs... Oh My!](#)” And once again, we have our friend, Boris the Dwarf:

I am so tired of hearing this argument. It's a freakin fantasy game! It doesn't have to make sense. If it did, then a **Cinder Wall** could never hold a **Bonesplitter** or wear



Lightning Greaves. But no one ever questions that when it happens.

But if you're looking for some justification, there's plenty of canon out there about how Merfolk can take human form and walk on land. Look no further than the classic movie "Splash."

More to the point of what I really wanted to say, I laughed out loud when I saw Maro's theme: "Do Ninjas Belong in Magic?"

Not because it was a bad topic, but because it is so out of character for him to pull such an obvious PR "Love Magic, Love Ninjas" stunt.

What the heck did you think his answer was going to be?

"So, at the end of this hypothetical argument played out through the non-sensical visualization, we can conclude Ninjas don't really belong in Magic after all."

That would never have happened.

C'mon Mark, resist Randy Buehler's call for you to turn to the dark side and stay honest with your readers. You've written some great pieces, and a handful of bad ones, but this one is the most dismal article yet. Please don't do it again. It's okay to say why you think Ninjas belong in Magic, but please don't ask what is nothing more than a rhetorical question with an answer that doesn't play out one way or the other toward that response.

- Boris the Dwarf

Boris,



While the dark side does have pretty things like anger and hatred, I've made a conscious effort to stay on the jedi side of **Magic** writing. It was never my intent to present the "Do Ninjas Belong In **Magic**?" as anything more than a rhetorical question. (It was Ninja Week after all.) It was supposed to represent a larger issue, which is **Magic's** ongoing struggle to maintain an identity while ever increasing the types of creatures it represents. I felt that it was an interesting conflict that most of my readers might not have been aware of. My answer wasn't so much about explaining why we do it as it was to explain the ramifications on the Creative Team for deciding to do it. If the game needs

Ninjas, how does the Creative Team make them **Magic** Ninjas?

As far as the **Cinder Wall** holding the **Bonesplitter**, the Creative Team has long ago abandoned the idea that every single thing in the game makes creative sense. Most equipment, for instance, creatively speaking is designed for humanoids, but **Magic** doesn't mechanically make separations between creature types when spelling out what a creature can do. I believe this is the right call, that this is a place where mechanics needs to trump flavor because the game is more interesting if the elephant can wear greaves. That said, there are places where flavor should trump mechanics. Just because the designers can think it up, doesn't mean that it's the best thing for **Magic** to have. There are numerous things that kill designs: rules, layout issues, templating concerns, general confusion. I consider creative concerns to be on that list.

But wait, the Ninja talk isn't over yet. Here's a few letters in response to "[When Ninjas Attack](#)":

Anyone else notice how similar Ninjutsu is to Super Haste?

-homestar

Homestar,

This might sound odd, but I didn't think of the similarity until it was pointed out in the thread. I created both mechanics. In each case, I came at the problem from a very different direction. For ninjutsu, I was trying to find a flavorful ability that mimicked the sneakiness of a ninja. For super haste, I was trying to find a mechanic that made sense being called "super haste". I think the interesting part though is what this says about the creative process. Obviously, deep in my head was this idea about different ways to play a card than we previously had done. Both creative

exercises led me to the same section in my head but because I got there from different directions I never noticed the similarity. Very interesting.

Regarding the article: I love it when each of the design stories ends with: "And then along comes Mark Rosewater and saves the day" kind of happy end, especially when he's not even on the design team. I don't even try to imagine how boring Magic could be without His genius. No, I'm not trying to say he's exaggerating his role in Making Magic, he's Lead Designer after all, and he might be the best one to fill this position... it's only that just the thought of counting all the I's in any one of his columns scares the hell out of me.

- makasat

Makasat,

The reason that ninety plus percent of my design stories are about myself is not because I do ninety plus amount of the work. It's not even because I have a big ego (which I do; it's just not the primary cause of this phenomenon). The major reason that most of the stories are about me is that it's my column and it's what I know. Every week I try to figure out how to give you all a glimpse into the creative process, which is hard because the creative process is a convoluted one. So I tend to show my own process as it's the only one I understand (well, it's at least the one I understand the best).

I try wherever I can to give credit to all the other designers. The reason I believe **Magic** is as good a game as it is because of the high level of our design staff. My focusing on myself is not meant as a slight to all that hard work. It's simply what I have to do to be able to put out a weekly column. Remember, my column is not intended to be a representation of design, but rather the insight through one designer's eyes.

Why I tend to write a lot of "and Mark saves the day" columns comes from my background in writing. Stories are always more captivating than isolated facts. So whenever I have some design insight, I like to put it into a story form whenever possible. And the most common way to tell a design story (or any scientific or creative breakthrough) is to present the problem, show all the attempted solutions and then end with the thing that finally worked. I'm not always the one that solves the problem (just look at my recent columns on things like the [flip cards](#), [scry](#) and [sunburst](#)) but as the Head **Magic** Designer I do have the highest percentage of problem solving. Not because I'm any better than the rest of the designers. Mostly because, unlike everyone else, I get involved in each and every problem.

As a final note, I believe that "Making **Magic**" is improved because I take a very personal approach to the writing. I use my column to honestly explain how I feel about different topics and give all you the sense of what it's like being a **Magic** designer. To do that requires a lot of "I"s.

And now it's time for the latest installment of "Ninjas and the Color Wheel":

It's ironical that ninjas should be restricted to only black and blue, since ninja strategies are based on five different element, which include certain characteristics which could be related to the colors in Magic.

Dresses as a teacher and starts lecturing

The escape strategies utilized by ninjas are traditionally called Gotonpo (five elements concealing and escaping methods). These five elements included fire, wood, water, metal, and earth.

Wood represents rising, growing, swelling energy. This element can be expressed by the statement "my forces marshal more troops and move against you with growing intensity as your forces attempt to hold onto your own territory". (green)

Earth represents gathering, condensing and stabilizing energy, represented by the statement "my forces draw together and intensify their hold on the territory as your forces attempt to slip in easily and surreptitiously" (white)

Metal represents hard, edged, unbreakable energy, represented by the statement "My forces launch an immediate and decisive attack against your forces as they attempt to build strength and move into an advantageous position" (red)

It would've been nice to have green, white, and red ninjas. It would have been great to have a gold ninja with all colors! Maybe some ninjas will have slightly off color abilities, but probably not.

This makes you wonder: did Wizards perform any research for Kamigawa, involving ninjas, samurai and the sort?

-Velessar

I thought part of red's new image was "the trickster". Ninja don't fall too far from that: Ninja make traps for people to fall into, and do all kinds of unsavory things that more noble people wouldn't consider.

Ninja seemed to work in red; sure, not green or white, but in red it works.

Any small wonder that if being smart and tricky are black and blue traits, that only black and blue are going to get more of the pie? (Oh, starting a riot, mentioning the color pie again). Red isn't stupid, just straitfoward.... normally. The whole "temporary stealing" and "redirection" add tricky to it's character.

I wanna know why Ninja aren't red! (Red has a serious shortage of mechanics too; this one seemed to fit).

- Dragon Bloodthirsty

Velessar & Dragon Bloodthirsty,

Could we have put Ninjas in all five colors? Possibly. Could they have been in red? Almost certainly. Should we have? This goes to the root of another big R&D conundrum – how much access should each color have to a mechanic? If we always segregate mechanics (meaning we specifically do not put them in every color) we miss interesting opportunities to make cool cards. If we never segregate then we start nibbling away at the unique feel we've established for each color. The answer is that R&D tries to strike a balance. Sometimes we limit a mechanic and sometimes we spread it across all five colors.

With Ninjas in particular I think we made the right choice. *Kamigawa* block has a flavor theme that the designers tried hard to imbue throughout the design. Ninjas were designed to be as cool and flavorful as possible. Inventing reasons to have white, green and red Ninjas seemed to take away from the core of what the Ninjas wanted. Our Ninjas aren't tricksters. They're mean, sneaky underhanded assassins and spies. And to us, that was black and blue. To quote *The Incredibles*: "If everyone's special then no one's special."

Thread Sonja

Let me just end with a few random posts. From "[Ice Guys Finish First](#)":

Actually, I think Mark is underrating **Brainstorm**. Philip Stanton's T1 metagame breakdown articles show the following cards getting the most play in Vintage:

In order:

1. **Force of Will**
2. Blue Fetchlands (Delta would be #3 if you don't count Strand here too)
3. **Brainstorm**

There are a few restricted cards that see proportionally more play (ancestral, lotus, sapphire), but **brainstorm** is really one of the best unrestricted cards in Type 1.

Obviously, it helps that most decks runs fetchlands in Type 1 (for their synergy with duals), but I think it goes much deeper. Combo decks all run 4x **brainstorm**; even dedicated turn 1 win decks like Belcher that run no shuffle effects beyond a couple of tutors. Drawing 3 cards for 1 mana really is strong, even if you have to put 2 cards back. In a deck where your card quality is very high, brainstorm is not merely good- it's borderline broken.



Honestly, if I had to pick the top 5 blue cards for Vintage, **Brainstorm** would be on there, along with **Tinker**, **Mind's Desire**, **Ancestral Recall**, and **Force of Will**. Yes, **Brainstorm** is better than **Mana Drain** and **Time Walk**.

In terms of pure card design, though, I still have to give **brainstorm** top marks, because it is not inherently broken--just look at how much less play it sees in Extended than in Type 1. In Type 2, I'm not even sure people would play it. Then again, **Mind's Desire** hasn't broken T2 yet either, even though it's easily the second most powerful blue card ever printed (**Tinker** has slightly more raw power, and is easier to cast effectively).

- Jacob Orlove

Jacob,

The development guys made fun of me for this one. **Brainstorm** it appears is more powerful than I thought. (This is why I'm a designer and not a developer.) I'm not sure it's so powerful that we'd never reprint it, but only when we understood the power we were returning to the game for doing so.

From "[Having Un](#)":

I just had a thought about this part of the article:

Blast from the Past

*This card along with **Old Fogey** are Mark Gottlieb's contributions to **Unhinged**. I like to think these cards do a good job of explaining why we rotate out mechanics in **Magic**.*

Okay, now **Old Fogey** I can see, because I don't think there were THAT many people who liked snow-covered lands (because they didn't have enough of an effect on the game), and as someone said in another article, banding and phasing were too complicated for ANYONE to understand them.

...But madness and kicker and buyback and cycling together? That's just *cool*. I think **Blast From the Past** makes the case why old mechanics should COME BACK to **Magic**.

One more thing; when can we expect **Unhinged** MB avatars? I, for one, would like a Johnny avatar.

-Listen2Reason

Listen2Reason,

While **Blast from the Past** is clearly less complicated than **Old Fogey**, it is still far, far too confusing to put into a real **Magic** set. You see, I get all the **Unhinged** rules questions (well, along with John Carter) and it's clear that **Blast from the Past** is one of the more confusing cards from the set (and this from a set filled with confusing cards). That said, I do agree it's fun to bring back old mechanics. I just wouldn't stick all of them on the same card.

From "[Un and Games](#)":

Sweet.

I wonder what the flavor text says? The slug seems to have knocked it all askew...

-Mugik

Mugik,

Funny you should ask. From time to time, R&D will make a bet (usually the loser buys the winner lunch) on how the audience will respond to something. Whenever that bet involves the **Magic** public noticing something, I always take the bet. (I learned long ago how rabid and thorough all of you are.) When I wrote the **Unhinged** April Fools article, I had a bet that the readers would notice the hidden message (the first letter of each paragraph spelled out "TAKE THE BAIT") in the announcement. With **Rocket Powered Turbo Slug**, I had a bet that the



players would figure out that the scrambled letters actually spelled out a piece of flavor text and they would piece together what the flavor text is. The bet was with Aaron Forsythe and I won if the players figured it out in 2004 (the set came out on November 20th). The flavor text was put together within twenty-four hours of the set being on sale. I later joked that taking December was greedy.

Anyway, I don't want to ruin the fun of solving the flavor text, so I'll leave that assignment to all of you. I'm guessing someone in the thread will solve your curiosity.

Thread Skeleton

And that is all I have for today. I hope my peek into the threads was interesting. If you don't normally take a peek each week, I urge you to do so. And while you're there, make a post. The more voices heard the better.

Let me end this week by stressing that I'm always game for feedback whether it be in e-mail (remember I read all e-mail sent to me even if I can't reply to each one) or on the threads.

Join me next week as we visit the land of the rising sun.

Until then, may you know the joy of adding your voice to the crowd.

Mark Rosewater



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