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Design of the Times

Mark Rosewater
 Making Magic
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When you get right down to it, writing is an act of theft. You see good ideas (whether they are personal events in your own life, interesting stories about other people's lives, or just something you saw another writer do) and you "borrow" them. The best writers put their own twist on it, but in the end good writing is knowing how to loot and pillage good ideas. My column today is no exception.

Several weeks ago I was reading an article where comic book writers were critiquing the classic comics of their youth. I was amazed about all the minute aspects about the comics that they recognized and were able to write about. And that's when it dawned on me. You know what's interesting? Artists examining their own art form. Perhaps this idea could work in "Making Magic".

Meanwhile, on the other side of my brain, I was mulling over the "elegance" problem. You see, as a designer I'm a big fan of elegance. So much so that I concocted a very off-the-beaten path article to try and demonstrate certain principals. (Called "Elegance" of course.) But "Elegance" proved to be a little too "out there" for many of my readers, and I was worried that I had tainted the concept of elegance. In fact, the topic has become kind of running joke in the column threads and I knew I needed to do something to demonstrate in a much more direct and reader-friendly way the importance of elegance in **Magic** card design.

I'm not sure which one was the chocolate and which one was the peanut butter, but a little Reese's moment happened in my head and I realized the article I wanted to write. I wanted to take a set of classically designed elegant cards and talk about why I feel they are so well designed. I would be a **Magic** designer reflecting on his craft. Plus it would allow me to talk about elegance in a way that actually included **Magic** cards. My writer instinct said that might go over better than fifty word clips about writing.

The topic of my first column (and maybe my last but I wanted to leave the door open if this column proved popular) seemed obvious. When you're studying art, you always go to the source. How could I begin any critique on **Magic** design without starting with the card set that introduced **Magic** to the world – Alpha. Plus, as a little side bonus, none of the cards are of my design so it would give me a little distance to analyze without any emotional attachment.

Here's how it's going to work. I've chosen five cards from Alpha. Here was my criteria:

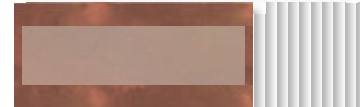
1. **The card's design had to be elegant** – This means that the card had to accomplish its task in a succinct and well crafted manner. Note that this article isn't solely about elegance. It's about good card design, of which elegance is a key component.
2. **The card's design had to feature significant depth of play** – This means the card had to create numerous types of play decisions
3. **The card needed to have good flavor** – This means that the card needed to have a flavor that enhanced the overall sense of the card
4. **The card had to hit upon a design point that wasn't touched upon by the other cards I picked** – This means that the card selection was highly influenced by my desire to make this column as interesting and educational as possible.
5. **One card from each color** – It just seemed like the right thing to do.

This list is not a Top Five list. It's not some commentary about what I thought were the best cards. This column is just my tribute to some of the fine design work done by Richard Garfield. Enough of the exposition – on with the good stuff:

Wrath of God

You destroy all creatures. Simple, to the point, and pretty damn cool. After all, **Magic** is at its heart a game about creatures. The ability to simply wipe them all out is a potent one. In fact, **Wrath of God** has such visceral punch that it's one of a handful of base set cards that has room for flavor text yet we purposely leave blank.

But that isn't the genius of the card. To appreciate Richard's masterwork, you have to dig deep into the heart of **Magic**. There you will find that **Magic** is a game of resource management. Each player is trying to maximize his resources to accomplish the key objective – knocking the opponent's life total to 0. As such, **Magic** dwells a lot on resource acquisition. You might be more familiar with them if I call them permanents. From a simplistic viewpoint (and trust me very simplistic), you want to get more permanents in play than your opponent. Or at least have the overall power of your permanents higher than those of your opponents. Now, there are two basic ways to do this. One, just get more



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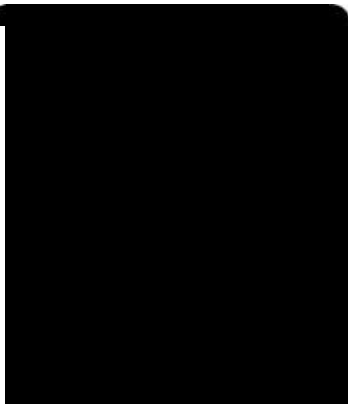
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stuff into play than your opponent can. Or two, remove permanents of your opponents leaving you with superior numbers and/or power.

Most removal in the game is one for one. A **Dark Banishing**, for example, trades the card in your hand for an opponent's creature in play. But one for one removal doesn't allow a key game component – a catch-up feature. You see, if your opponent has more cards than you (counting cards in hand and cards in play), trading one for one will never allow you to catch up once he or she is ahead. And in game design, it's important that players lagging behind have the tools to leapfrog their opponents. Otherwise games become predestined and boring.

This means that **Magic** needed mass removal. That is, it wanted cards that were able to get rid of more than just one other card. But mass removal has the problem of being kind of unbalancing. On one hand that's good, the unbalancing part is the catch-up feature. But **Magic** is a game of skill and you don't want players feeling as if they have no control of their fate. This means that mass removal cards need to be expensive. This is where we see the **Catch-22** sneaking up on us. If a card's expensive, the player who's behind might never get the chance to play it. So how do you allow players to catch up in a way that doesn't take away the skill from the game?

Wrath of God solved this classic problem in a very elegant way. It affected everybody. Sure, you can destroy all of your opponent's creatures, but only at the cost of your own. If you're way behind, you're happy to make this trade. But if the game's close, it's not so easy a decision. By making the mass removal affect everyone, you scale its usefulness.

But **Wrath of God's** genius doesn't stop there. Its mere existence forces another aspect to the game, creature management. To understand this concept, let's imagine the game if no mass creature removal existed. Whenever you have a creature, you might as well play it because there's no threat for over-committing. But with **Wrath of God** (and other mass creature removal) players have to manage how much of their creature base they want to commit at any one time. They can be aggressive if they want to "speed up the clock" (meaning they want to do more damage a turn to end the game faster). Or they can be more passive if their route to victory needs them to have the resources to be reactive.

Finally, the card helps solve a flavor problem for white. White is the one color for equality. It doesn't like special treatment. It wants to make rules that everyone follows. It doesn't tend to push itself. So how do you get advantage when you're unwilling to give yourself a leg up? You find a way to turn equality into a weapon. Make it active and offensive. **Wrath of God** answers this call. Evening the playing field is quite aggressive when you're the one behind. Or you're the one that knew such an event was coming and planned ahead. **Wrath of God** gives the most defensive color some teeth.

Wrath of God is a catch-up feature that adds strategic depth to the management of one of the game's most important resources. And it's super flavorful. How cool is that?

Unsummon

Let's move from the big expensive effect to the cheap tiny effect. The public tends to dwell on the big splashy rare, but for the designer the Holy Grail is the elegant common. Designers want to create an effect that's simple enough to be common, but relevant enough to the game that it has interesting depth of play. **Unsummon** is one such card.

Let's start by examining how the card plays into blue's strengths and weaknesses. Blue was created by Richard to be the color with the least removal. This was done because he had chosen to put counterspells in blue. Counterspells are so potent that Richard knew he needed to give the color a strong weakness. An inability to destroy permanents seemed apropos as it punished blue for letting spells resolve. Blue could counter anything but once it let the opportunity pass, it started having problems.

Counterspells by design were created so that a blue mage had to constantly make choices. He didn't have the luxury to counter everything so he had to pick and choose what to let through. This meant that blue mages had to have some resources to deal with permanents. Since they couldn't destroy them, Richard started exploring other options. You could steal them, shut them down, tax them, punish opponents for using them, etc. (Note that many of these items have shifted to other colors over the years as blue was a little too good at dealing with permanents.) In the end, the most interesting answer was to undo them. If a wizard used magic to summon a creature to the battlefield, couldn't a blue mage simply undo it? Just send the creature back.

The genius of **Unsummon** is the idea that cards can be removed from play yet sent to places other than the graveyard. The hand in particular is interesting from a design standpoint as it gives utility to the person who gets the card back. You see, usually card removal moves the game forward. Cards put in the graveyard are for all intents and purposes used up. Unless a necromancer shows up, for instance, a creature that's been **Shocked** is no longer going to impact the game.



What **Unsummon** does is separate the value of being in play from the future potential of the card. What this means is that a **Terror** not only stops a **Grizzly Bears** this turn, it stops it for every future turn. **Unsummon** deals with the threat of a creature being in play but forgoes handling the card's potential. By doing so, **Unsummon** starts messing with an area that is very much at home for blue, time. Returning a creature to an owner's hand only stops the creature temporarily. **Unsummon** doesn't answer the problem, it merely buys you time to find answers that do. Often that answer is a counterspell. **Unsummon** allows a blue wizard to revisit that moment that they let the creature slip through.

Traditional removal might have added card advantage to the game (the idea that the player with the access to the most cards/power wins the game). But **Unsummon** added tempo advantage. The idea behind tempo advantage is that cards can be dead without them being actually removed from the hand. A card in hand that cannot be played is very similar to a card that you forced the player to discard.

Unsummon also has the added benefit of having dual functionality. Most cards in **Magic** are offensive or defensive. **Terror**, for example, is almost always used on the opponent's creatures while **Giant Growth** is used almost exclusively on yours. But some cards, like **Unsummon**, function in such a way that they do different things when used on yourself versus when it's used on an opponent. When used on an opponent's creature, **Unsummon** is an offensive tempo card. When used on your own creatures, the card becomes more defensive. By having dual functionality, **Unsummon** functions kind of like a split card. And as time shows again and again, versatility in **Magic** is worth its weight in gold.

The final potency of **Unsummon** is the imbalance it creates in mana. And remember, mana is the lifeblood of the resource management game. If I get enough ahead of you in mana production, odds are I'm going to win. This is why **Unsummon** is often such a good deal. You're paying one mana for this spell. Odds are your opponent spent a lot more. When used properly, this effect can prove quite potent.

It's interesting to note that blue seems to attack very different aspects of the game than the other colors. This is one of the reasons that I believe blue has been so dominant historically. Players are ready for you to mess with their permanents. But your mana? Your time? The average player isn't able to bounce back quite as effectively. And all this for one blue mana.

Nightmare

I expect this entry to raise a few eyebrows. Of all the black Alpha cards, how did I end up choosing to talk about this one? Well, for starters – cool name! And hey, it's a badass flying flaming horse. All good stuff. But the **Nightmare**'s flavor isn't what drew me to talk about this card (although you have to admit that the flavor's pretty good). What drew me to **Nightmare** is that it's a different example of elegance in design. Many of the other cards I chose have had the ability to change functionality. **Nightmare**'s shift is about power. And it does so in a very flavorful way.

In fact, let's start with the flavor. Often when players think about flavor they turn to the card's name, art and flavor text. What many people forget is that mechanics can also carry great flavor. **Nightmare** is a perfect example. (Hmm, go figure.) Let's begin by talking about how **Nightmare**'s mechanic plays into a major theme of black. Each of the colors in **Magic** has an identity. Part of black's identity is that it wants to suck you into using more and more black magic. It's the one magic that encourages you to commit to it and only it. But Richard decided to be subtle with this flavor. He made sure that black spells had more colored mana than the other four colors. He made numerous spells that became stronger the more black you played. He created a lot of synergy between the black spells that encouraged you towards playing a lot of black in your deck. **Nightmare** is one such card. The more swamps you have, the stronger the **Nightmare**. You don't have to play mono-black, but then your **Nightmare** isn't going to be quite as strong. And that flavor is not conveyed through the name, art or flavor text. It all comes from the mechanic.



Now that we have flavor out of the way, let's talk about power. The majority of cards in **Magic** are static. What I mean by that is that they have the same power level every turn. When I play a **Grizzly Bear**, he has the same power level turn two as he does turn ten. And proportional to the available power (remember that the mana system keeps sloping the power up as turns progress) **Grizzly Bear** gets worse over time. But Richard understood the importance of having non-static creatures; that is, creatures whose value could fluctuate over time. Having non-static creatures does three important things.

First, it allows escalation without constant card churn. **Magic** is more fun if the power level escalates as the game progresses. Some of this is handled by more powerful spells being played later in the game. But non-static creatures is another piece in this puzzle. Second, non-static creatures create more interesting play choices. For example, knowing that the **Nightmares** depend on swamps will change how both players play. Your opponent may strategically **Stone Rain** a swamp even if you have five in play. Third, non-static creatures tend to help even out resource management issues. This is because non-static creatures usually have to take their cue from some resource. This means that the resource in question now has extra value to the player. Take the **Nightmare**. Because every swamp matters, late game swamp draws that might seem meaningless no longer do so.

As you can see, not just another pretty horse on fire.

Earthquake

I've already talked about mass removal with **Wrath of God**, so I thought I'd focus on several different aspects of **Earthquake**. First, I'd like to examine an aspect of **Earthquake** that I call expandability. That is, spells that allow you to strengthen their effect by putting more resources into them (most often this is mana). Let's take a look at the role they play. You see, the way **Magic** balances its resource management is with the mana system. By only allowing one land to be played a turn, the game naturally slows down the more powerful effects. But it creates a little problem. The mana system forces players to build decks to match the curve. That is, players are punished if their deck cannot make effective use of the early turns. As an example, it's very hard to play a deck that only has spells that cost only four or more. The reason being that no deck can afford to give their opponent a three or four turn head start on them.

This means that players are forced by the game to play a spectrum of mana costs. (Although there is a strategy where players play all cheap spells.) As such, they have little room for big spells with large effects. It was this problem that Richard tackled with the expandable spells. **Earthquake** could be a **Tremor** or a **Pyroclasm** or it could be a **Wildfire** or an **Inferno**. The spell expands to fit the space available.



Now I remember in college sitting in film class watching old films and thinking to myself how boring they were. Until my film professor explained how that convention that I had taken for granted because it's become a staple of the medium didn't exist until this film. And that's when film class got interesting. Understanding how the director (or writer or editor or cinematographer, etc.) recognized the need for this thing that didn't yet exist and how he created the item to fill the need - this is one of those moments for **Magic** design. The X spell might seem obvious now, but that's only because Richard understood the game's need for it.

The other interesting design aspect of the card is what I call "the dial effect". Because the card can expand its effect, it gives the player an interesting series of decisions. How big should the **Earthquake** be? And much of the time the answer isn't "as big as it can be". Most often, the best used **Earthquake** is very precise in its execution. And this makes for a very deep set of play decisions.

Be aware that these play decisions are not just in the present. They very much define the future. Let's say you have an **Earthquake** in your hands. It dictates when you play creatures and which creatures you play. This leads to a similar reaction by your opponent as he or she has to anticipate the **Earthquake**.

And finally, I'd be remiss if I didn't show some admiration for the beauty of the card's flavor. I feel that extra limitations on mechanics for flavor purposes have to be very carefully handled, but the "non-flying" restriction on **Earthquake** is brilliant.

All in all, **Earthquake** is everything you want in a well-designed card. It's potent, it's flexible, it creates interesting play decisions, and it nails its flavor. What more could you ask for?

Giant Growth

And so we end with green. But don't worry, green has a doozy. **Giant Growth** is amazing as it does so much with so little. You want the essence of elegance in card design just stare at **Giant Growth** for a few minutes. As I'm talking about it just keep reminding yourself that the card only has eight words of rules text (okay, technically seven words plus whatever "+3/+3" counts as).

So what's so great about **Giant Growth**? Probably the most important aspect of the card is its effect on creature combat. As I explained earlier, **Magic** is, at its crux, a game about creatures. Before I get too many letters, let me stress that I know the game isn't dependent upon creatures. Yes, there are many good decks that never use creatures. But the threat of creatures is a constant in the game. Creatures are the most efficient resource when damage is examined against cost. A 1/1 creature for a single mana has the potential to single-handedly win the game. No one mana non-creature spell has the potential to deal 20 damage. (Okay, almost none – don't start sending me letters about **Mana Clash**.)

Anyway, creatures matter quite a bit in the game. And if both players have creatures then creature combat is going to matter. But here's the fundamental problem with creature combat. It's kind of boring. Why? Because all the information is public. When I attack with my 3/3 creature, I do so knowing all of my opponent's blocking options. If any of the options is not in my favor, then I most often don't attack. But **Giant Growth** (and cards of its ilk) changed all that. **Giant Growth** made creature combat sexy. It added a touch of mystery and suspense. Now perhaps I'll attack with my 3/3 when the board position doesn't seem to be in my favor. And I don't even need to have **Giant Growth** in my hand. The mere threat of the card can change my opponent's actions. The card can do things when it's not even in my deck (although it would help if you're playing green). That's a potent card.



In addition, **Giant Growth** scores major brownie points from me for its versatility. Here's just a few things it can do:

- Deal an additional 3 damage to my opponent (It's a **Flame Jet**.)
- Allow my creature to destroy a creature it couldn't (It's a **Terror**.)
- Save my creature from destruction due to lethal damage (It's a **Healing Salve**.)

- Enhance an ability or effect that cares about power (It's a... okay, there's no direct comparison for this one.)
- Enhance an ability or effect that cares about toughness (Or this one.)

Eight words! Maybe fifty links on elegance was too long. Try eight words. There's no better poster child for elegance than this card. It does so much with so little. It even has an elegant flavor. Man, this must be how sculptors feel when they travel to Florence and look at Michelangelo's David. I'm sure they sit at the back of the room looking at it saying to themselves, "How am I supposed to top that?"

That's how I feel when I look at **Giant Growth**. The card is so simple yet has such an insane depth of play, it's mind-boggling.

Design Off

Hopefully today's column will help you appreciate some of the beauty of **Magic** card design. When all the pieces come together, a well-designed card is like a piece of art. Think of today as a walk through the **Magic** Museum's earliest wing.

Join me next week when I'll be examining the sixth color that actually isn't the sixth color.

Until then, may you take a moment during a game to appreciate the card you are about to play.

Mark Rosewater

But Wait There's More

Two weeks from today is another non-theme week. That means I have to come up with a topic for it. And then it dawned on me that maybe I didn't. So here's what I'm going to do. For the rest of this week send me ideas for topics that you'd like me to talk about in that column. No topic is off limits. Is there something you'd like me to talk about? Here's your chance.

Next week comes the fun part. I'll select the top 10% of the entries that tickle my fancy and let you all vote on them. Then the following week, my column will intertwine the top two winners. Top two. You heard me. It will be my job to find a way to integrate the two topics, make it relevant to **Magic** design and have it be entertaining.

Why am I doing this? Why did Houdini tie himself up in a straightjacket, lock himself in a box and get tossed in the sea? You know, for kicks. I'm very eager to see what happens.

But that means all of you have to do your part. Send me topics.



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