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The Answer Lies Within

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Making Magic
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Today's column is going to be a bit of an odd one. Two weeks ago I wrote a column ("[The Troubled One](#)") that created a significant amount of e-mail and bulletin posts, much of which was a bit critical of what I said (or what I didn't say). As I read many of the comments I started getting a feeling of déjà vu. I realized that I had heard many of these comments before. I'm not trying to imply that it was the same writers (although some readers/writers are rather prolific), but rather I started noticing that certain themes about how R&D functions seem to be recurring.

So I began looking at old e-mail and threads and discovered that my memory was correct. I talk a lot about individual decisions about specific design decisions but I've never really touched upon some of the big picture issues about how R&D functions, issues that are constantly talked about in these responses. It then dawned on me that it would be interesting to use my column this week to address some of these issues and set the record straight.

I'm honestly not trying to be defensive. I simply want to explain how certain things work, what some of our guiding philosophies are and give you all a sense of what R&D's job entails on a little more personal level. For organizational purposes, I going to craft my answers around common criticisms tossed my way. Sound good?

"Why Have You Abandoned Richard Garfield's Vision?"

This is sort of a leading question. How about "Have You Abandoned Richard Garfield's Vision?" Heavens, no. It's my opinion that Richard combined three genius ideas in one when he created **Magic**, each one of which is mind-boggling amazing on its own. First was the trading card game genre. It seems so obvious now, but so does the paper clip or the wheel. People liked trading cards. Games can be played with cards. The little missing piece was Richard's idea of what a trading card game could be.

If the game doesn't fit neatly inside the box then you have to embrace the exploration of the game. This had several ramifications. First, it meant that the game had to be playable with almost any combination of pieces. And second the basic design had to encourage the mixing and matching of different pieces. In addition, the game had to make each individual card exciting unto itself. That Richard pulled this all off in his first attempt is mind blowing. I think its pretty safe to say that R&D has not drifted from Richard's concept of a trading card game.

The second genius invention was the mana system. I'm talking about the entire resource management of the game that revolves around mana. Mana costs, activation costs, land, mana, the works. It's simple, elegant, flexible, dynamic, interactive, durable. I can go on and on. The game designer within me just has to bow and go "I'm not worthy" in its presence.

As a **Magic** designer, I am as intimate with the mana system as a mechanic is with an engine. And it runs very smoothly. Now, some would say, "What about mana screw or mana flooding?" I feel that blaming the game for mana problems is like blaming it for shuffling. What makes **Magic** such a thrilling game is the fact that it's always so unexpected. The thrill is in reacting to the unknown. And the unknown comes with randomness and variance. Otherwise it wouldn't be the unknown. The drama that comes from hunting for your third land or even just surviving off just two for as long as you can is one of the things that gives the game the adrenaline rush that makes it so much fun. Yes, sometimes you get a dud hand, but defining **Magic** on that is like describing surfing by talking about your worst wave for the day.

Anyway, R&D is fully aboard on the mana system. Other than a few terminology changes over the years, nothing has fundamentally changed about how mana functions from the day Richard unleashed **Magic** on the world.

The third genius creation was the color wheel. It gave definition to not just the flavor but the very mechanics of the game. Just try to imagine **Magic** without the five colors. Now, here's the important part. The genius was the concept of the color pie not the execution. The execution was stolen from every story Richard had ever read, seen or been told. It had pieces from every mythology under the sun. But the concept of the color pie, the very idea that all these ideas should even be put together is such a way is, yet again, mind-blowingly brilliant.

This is also were I think R&D often gets "taken to task" for abandoning Richard's vision. I think many players make the false assumption that there's only one correct execution and that it is Richard's way. But that's one of the genius parts of the color pie. There is an infinite number of executions (okay maybe not infinite but just a very,



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very large number – higher than you or I can count). The job of R&D (both the designers and developers as well as the creative team) is to constantly reshape that execution.



I know there are some players out there who see R&D's latest color shifting as something sacrilegious. As if we changed the unchangeable. I'll get more to this point in a second, but I want to stress that in all the discussions R&D has had about the color pie, never did anyone try to change the structure of the color pie. The color pie was always the foundation upon which we built our discussions. To say the structure was merely accepted is unfair. It was heartily embraced. The structure drove our discussions. And yes, we chose to change some of the execution of the color pie, but never did we doubt the genius of its structure.

Here's the shocker. Many abilities from a flavor perspective can fit in more than one place. But for the good of the game they want to be in only one place. (Or sometimes in just a few places.) When R&D massaged the color pie, we weren't looking to move abilities to places they didn't belong, we merely were reevaluating where abilities were

able to go. And while some abilities might seem very linked to a color through history, that doesn't mean they're immovable from a color pie perspective. Artifact destruction, for instance, was weighted towards red and white but green is the color that clearly by its own conflicts (with blue) hates artifice most. A green **Disenchant** might seem awkward at first glance but as you examine how the colors interrelate, it is a much more logical choice.

If it's so logical, why didn't Richard do it? Because Richard didn't have the time to plumb the color pie as deeply as we did. We took years to do it. Richard put the initial game together in a few months. Richard went off mostly instinct. And he did an awesome job. But that doesn't mean that every decision he made was ideal. Even Richard openly admits this. He made three genius ideas. Four if you count the idea to combine them all. I think it's okay to admit that his execution of some of these ideas might not have been perfect.

As you can see, the core of what Richard created is all very much alive and beating. R&D would be fools to mess with it. It is the compass that guides us. But retaining the skeleton of what makes **Magic Magic** is a far cry from never challenging how we're going to dress it up. To repeat my lovely car metaphor, Richard showed us how to make cars. But that doesn't mean all our cars have to look like a Model T.

Which leads us to:

“Why Did You Change [FILL IN THE BLANK]?”

Why does R&D change things? Because **Magic** is, at its core, about change. The most fun part of a game for most gamers is the part where they figure out how the game ticks. It's all about the center or the corners or about piece A or part B. It's the part of the gaming experience that I call “the crispy hash browns”. You see, my favorite part of hash browns is the crispy part at the top. (And really, isn't everyone's?) The part underneath is okay, but I think I eat it mostly because, well, I already ate the crispy part. And so it is with most games. The learning part of the game is the crispy hash browns. It's the best part of the experience. But once you eat through it, you have to learn to live with the non-crispy part. And it can be good. But deep in your heart you know it will never be the crispy part.

This is where Richard's genius comes into play yet again (the irony of all this is that Richard is rather modest, so I hope he forgives me all my gushing). He created a hash brown that's all crispy part. (Well, mostly crispy part.) You see, just when you've cracked the game and figured it all out, it changes and you have to do it all over again. And this constant changing never ends. Because it's the changing that defines the game.

So why does R&D change things? Because it's our job to do so. That's what we're paid to do. Now here's the kooky part. Change is disorienting and scary. People, being creatures of habit, tend to fear change. Thus, the very thing that makes **Magic** such a fun game also scares people. This is where R&D needs to have a thick skin. Whenever we take away a card or shift a mechanic into a new color or fundamentally change how a certain deck or strategy works, we're going to upset someone. Probably many someones. But that's okay. Just as they latched onto that first thing, they will latch onto something else. And who knows maybe one day that first thing will return and they'll be very, very happy.



“Why Doesn't R&D Care?”

I've never worked in a place before where my coworkers cared personally so much about the thing they are working on. **Magic** is not just some random item that we happened to be tasked with working on. It is something that everyone involved feels passionate about. Be aware that it's a great honor to work on **Magic**. I am one of only two people in the entire department (Brian Schneider, **Magic** Head Developer is the other) who has the luxury to work on **Magic** 100% of my time. For most R&D people, they work on **Magic** as much as they are allowed. And we have to dole it out because it's so coveted.

The reason this is so is because **Magic** is personal to each and every one of them. Everyone understands that we are part of something much bigger than any one person and just the chance to be part of it is a great feeling.



All of R&D got the job partially because they were a gamer. To all but the few that actually playtested Alpha (currently that's just Bill Rose and Charlie Catino), they once were on the other side of the **Magic** fence. My journey to Wizards, for example, stemmed from my love of the game. I talk to my Los Angeles friends and they are still bowled over the fact that "little game I was so obsessed about" has turned into a major career for me.

My point is we care. We do things we would never, ever do in any normal job. We have passionate fights about the littlest of details because we understand how much each decision will impact the game and the players. We want to do what is right for **Magic** not because we are paid to do it but because we honestly care what happens to the game. (This isn't meant to be a knock against getting paid. I do appreciate my salary as

does all of R&D. I'm just pointing out what tends to motivate our work on **Magic**.)

Here's where I think the question comes from. R&D clearly takes actions that upset players. Why do we do that? Several reasons. Number one, not everyone plays for the same reasons. When we make one player type happy we often upset another. For example, I don't know how many rare Timmy cards I've been yelled at about by pros because they're "limited bombs". Necessary evil. Not every player is going to like every card. If that were true we have a superly narrow niche game that was discontinued years ago.

Two, sometimes what is good for the game is not popular. The easiest example is card rotation. In order to make space for new things, old things have to leave. Players don't like to see their old favorites leave. But it's the right thing to do. It's what the game needs to survive. So R&D bites the bullet and does the unpopular task.

Three, part of good drama is sometimes forcing the audience to experience something they don't want to. As an example, often times when designing a block, we'll find some truism of the game and shatter it to pieces. We take something comfortable that the players have learned to rely on and take it away. At first it's uncomfortable but as the players learn the set they find the new rhythm. I call this tough love. The players might grumble about it at first but they always thank us for it later.

Four, R&D is, gasp, human. We, gasp, make mistakes. Hold on a second, let me catch my breath here. That's better. Sometimes all of you are unhappy because we didn't anticipate the reaction it would create. But we seldom do anything that we purposely know will upset players if we don't feel there's an overall gain for it.

So yes, we do do things that will upset you, but not because we don't care.

“How Can R&D Not Have Seen [FILL IN THE BLANK]?”

Learning about a new **Magic** set in R&D is a vastly different thing than learning about it as a player. To understand let's walk you through both experiences. We'll start with that of the player (this one should be familiar): You go to a prerelease or perhaps just buy some new booster packs at the local store. You are exposed to a set of new cards. While you've never seen them before, you understand that they are the new cards from the new expansion. The cards are all finished products with names, art and proper templating. They're going to do what they say they do. And you know that somewhere you will find a definitive list that identifies what each and every card will do. And you know, barring rather rare errata, that these cards will always do what they say they will do right now. When you get home you can hop on the internet and interact with thousands of other players that you can share insights with. And it's in context with extensive information of every set that's come before it.

Okay, let's try it from the R&D perspective. One day you get asked to join in on a late design or early development playtest. You see the stickered cards from the set for the first time. The cards have goofy names and usually some pretty pathetic templates (it turns out for a writer I'm horrible at templating – then I realized that templating is secretly math, which I suck at). Each card will do what it says it does. Probably. Unless one of the designers or the lead developer yells something out while the games are being played. (“Myopic Bushman is supposed to have haste. Write it on the card.”) Or unless it becomes clear that the rules for it just don't work. Anyway, somewhere there's a list of the cards, but it will change. Each and every day until R&D hands off the file. Individual cards will come and go. Whole mechanics will come and go. Card powers can change. Mana costs can change. Power/toughness can change. That information will eventually make it to the playtest sticker, but the change might have happened since the last ones were printed. And if you want to share your insights on the file, you can talk to anyone in R&D. Well, anyone that's up to date with the file. Usually a single digit number. And you have to gauge how it's going to interact with two (and sometimes three) sets that the public hasn't even seen yet. You have to make assumptions based on assumptions you made on previous development work. You know, with that same handful of guys.

My point here is that the real world and R&D examine sets in radically different conditions. As someone who watches this process, my question isn't how do they miss things but how do they catch so much? The task at hand is so enormous that I don't know how the developers are capable of spotting so much. What seems obvious to you is based on you having thousands of pieces of information that the developers did not have at the time. If the developers had the same pieces of information, of course it would be obvious. But they didn't. And so maybe



they didn't see it. This isn't because they're stupid. It just means that how they perceived the set at the time was in a very different place than when you how you perceive it now.

Our Time Is Up

As much as this is the kind of column I could continue writing forever (and if you liked it let me know, I can do more of them), time commitments, like work and family, force me to write less than a novel. Only short stories. Maybe a novella every once in a blue moon. My goal with today's column was to get a chance to address some common complaints and try to give all of you a glimpse behind the scenes to explain why we do things that might not seem obvious at first blush.

Join me next week when I talk about losing a hand.

Until then, may you take a moment to examine someone else's shoes.

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*Mark Rosewater is Head **Magic** Designer. What this fancy title means is that he's in charge of **Magic** design. This gets him a lot of mail (which he actually reads). When not alternatively destroying and saving **Magic**, he likes to spend time with his family, do stereotypically geeky things (play games, read comics, watch a lot of science fiction, etc.) and write about himself in third person.*



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