

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



Fun, Fun, Fun

Mark Rosewater
Making Magic
Monday, April 18, 2005



The interesting thing about writing a weekly column is that every once in while it wanders off in a direction you don't expect. This week is a perfect example. This week I was planning to talk about outside influences on **Magic** design (and don't worry; I will in some future column), but I got detoured by a response in last week's thread. For those that didn't read last week's column ("[Discard Tricks](#)") it was Discard Week so I was taking a look at the design of discard cards. While doing so I started talking about the role of "fun" in card design. This on the heels of a [column by Aaron Forsythe](#) explaining how [Trinisphere](#) was restricted in Vintage partially because it made a very un-fun environment. Anyway, the combination of these two columns led a reader named HamHam (I'll assume that's not his real name) to [write the following](#):

I for one am growing increasingly concerned with R&D's apparent preoccupation with something as ephemeral and subjective as "fun". I don't see how they can really decide what is and is not "fun"; especially when they say stuff like "Players actually preferred losing a card of their opponent's choice than losing one to the whim of fate." and you wonder what sort of stupid n00bs they get this stuff from. I always thought random discard got cut because of power-level issues, but apparently it was that "fun" thing messing around.

At first I was just going to post a response on the thread but the more I thought about it, I realized that this reply was worthy of an entire column. So, without further ado:

My Reply

HamHam,

You are correct to recognize that we are preoccupied with something as subjective as "fun". But we have a pretty good reason. That's what we do. "Fun" is the business we're in. We make games. Games are a form of entertainment. The number one reason people engage in entertainment is to enjoy themselves. AKA "have fun."

We concentrate on whether things are "fun" because that's what sells our product. That's what makes people come back and buy more. That's what gives us a competitive advantage over everyone else who makes games. If all of you aren't having fun, we're failing as game designers.

In today's column I wanted to take a look at the complexity of "making the game fun". It is a much deeper issue than I think most people realize. So, let's begin with the most important question.

What is "fun"?

A good place to start is a practical definition. According to good 'ol [dictionary.com](#), fun has three definitions:

1. A source of enjoyment, amusement, or pleasure.
2. Enjoyment; amusement: *have fun at the beach.*
3. Playful, often noisy, activity.

The first two definitions intertwine the idea of fun with that of enjoyment. So, let's [look up enjoyment](#) (once again at dictionary.com):

1. The act or state of enjoying.
2. Use or possession of something beneficial or pleasurable.
3. Something that gives pleasure: *Classical music was her chief enjoyment.*
4. *Law.* The exercise of a right.



The first definitions is the kind that makes you hate dictionaries. And the fourth one is specific to an unrelated topic. Definitions two and three tie enjoyment into pleasure. So let's continue with our game of dictionary telephone and [check out pleasure](#) on dictionary.com:

1. The state or feeling of being pleased or gratified.
2. A source of enjoyment or delight: *The graceful skaters were a pleasure to watch.*
3. Amusement, diversion, or worldly enjoyment: "Pleasure... is a safer guide than either right or duty" (Samuel Butler).
4. Sensual gratification or indulgence.
5. One's preference or wish: *What is your pleasure?*

Finally we're starting to get to some tangible things: gratification, delight, amusement, diversion (I'm not even going to touch definition number four). Fun appears to be tied into two basic human emotions: happiness and

PRODUCTS

Dissension *Guildpact*
All Magic products



RULES

Core Game
Basic Rulebook
Comprehensive Rules
All Magic Rules

MESSAGE BOARDS

 All Magic message boards
magicthegathering.com
forum
Rules Q&A forum
Magic Online announcements

MAGIC ONLINE

Download Now! Check server status

Magic Online Academy *Magic Online FAQ*

NOVELS

Dissension
Ravnica Cycle, Book III
by Cory Herndon
More fiction at [Inside Wizards](#)

excitement. Thus, if R&D wants to make the game fun, we have to make you all happy and excite you. Let's take a look at each of these two pieces:

Happiness

How does a game designer make players happy? The same way you make anyone happy. You can give them something they don't have but want. You can take away something they do have but don't want. You can make them feel good about themselves. You can help them accomplish a desire. You can create something that produces a pleasurable experience. Let's take a look at each of these as they apply to **Magic**:

- **Give them something they don't have but want** – Make a **Magic** card that does something that's never been done before. Or give them an effect that has been done before but with a twist that allows new uses. Give them an old effect but in a new color or card type.
- **Take away something they do have but don't want** – Create cards that provide new answers to old problems. Make cards that change the environment to shift the game away from an unpopular place. Heck, ban and restrict problem cards.
- **Make them feel good about themselves** – Make cards that require thought to build around. Create narrow cards that players have to search to find uses for. Build open-ended cards that allow for the possibility of interesting combos.
- **Help them accomplish a desire** – Create a card that finally allows a deck type to exist. Make a new ability that answers a plea that players have been clamoring for. Finish the cycle.
- **Create something that produces a pleasurable experience** – Make cards that make interesting moments unto themselves. Create cards that combine to create some culmination. Put together cards that drip was flavor.



Magic design is chock-full of ways to make players happy.

Excitement

How does a game designer excite players? The same way you excite anyone. Surprise them. Give them something they've been waiting for. Pump their adrenaline. Challenge them. Show them the thrill of victory. In **Magic** terms:

- **Surprise them** – Make cards, mechanics and themes they don't expect. Tweak old cards in ways they don't anticipate. Do things in every aspect of the card that they just don't see coming.
- **Give them something they've been waiting for** – Foreshadow something is coming and then make it. Create cycles over time that allows the player to anticipate what comes next. Evolve themes in a way that lets the players guess what comes next.
- **Pump their adrenaline** - Create cards with a large variance in effect. Make cards that are high risk, high reward. Put out cards that push the metagame in aggressive ways.
- **Challenge them** – Make cards that dare players to find a use for them. Create cards that require extensive play to master. Put out cards that hide their true power level.
- **Show them the thrill of victory** – Make big cards with huge effects that dominate the game. Create cards of a high power level that consistently bring home the win. Put out cards that combine to create devastating effects.

As with happiness, there are many ways to excite **Magic** players.

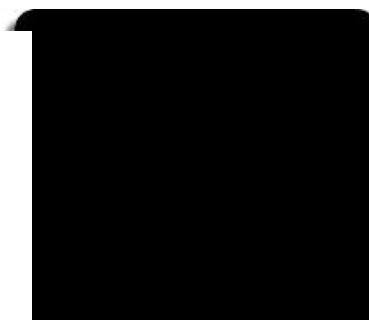
The point of these last few sections is to stress that there are many, many ways to make cards “fun”. While at first glance it might seem arbitrary, you'll find with some examination that there are many tried and true methods to create fun in the game.



Finding the Nooks and Crannies

The next step to creating fun is understanding all the places that fun can be found:

Discovery – The first chance cards have to create enjoyment is the day they are initially unwrapped. Many cards are designed to have a huge impact when they are first seen. (I don't want to get into it here, but if you'd like to hear a rant on spoilers, check out an old column of mine called "[The Leak That Was](#)".) What I call a “wow factor”. We want the first viewing of a card to crack a smile. For all the different reasons listed in the last two sections. Just learning of the existence of certain cards should unto itself be fun. The split cards from *Invasion*, for example, is the perfect example of cards with the “wow factor”. I remember seeing players open them up at the prerelease and just watching their faces. First they were shocked. Then they began to try to understand what the card did. And then came the big smile when they figured it out.



Deck Building – The next place that cards can entertain is during the deck building process. Many cards have interesting impacts on deck design that cannot be appreciated until you start thinking of them in that light. A good example of this is [Isamaru, Hound of Konda](#). It's not until you start to put a deck together that you really start to think about how many copies to put in your deck. It's a one-drop that you want in your opening hand yet you don't particularly want multiple copies of.

Moment of Play – Some cards are most enjoyable at the very moment they are cast. The game almost stops as they take on a mini-game aspect. A good example of this would be [Mindslaver](#). The controlled turn in many ways is its own game. How much damage can you do taking control of your opponent for one turn? Even if you don't win, a dominant [Mindslaver](#) turn can make a player giddy.



Scope of the Game – While some cards shine in the heat of the moment, others take time to do their thing. They create interesting situations or help foster an ongoing experience that's enjoyable. A good example of this would be [Vesuvan Doppelganger](#) (it feels good to pull an example out of the oldies bin every once in a while). When you first play the Doppelganger you have no idea of the roller coaster ride you are about to take. But you hold onto your proverbial hat and enjoy the ups and downs.

The Post Game – Some cards are at their best not during the game but after the game. These are the cards that create stories. Cards that live and breathe in the tales that get spun around them. The imprint mechanic was good for this. While you always have a plan with imprint cards, many times you were forced into a corner you didn't expect (especially in limited). And you had an experience that had to be shared.

The Metagame – Certain cards shine not by what they do as much as the world that gets created around them. [Haunting Echoes](#), for instance, had a quirky effect in that it caused players to question playing four of a card.

Often players would swap out a card for another similar but not identical. This reevaluation created some interesting choices as players didn't just automatically stop at the best version of the effect.

These aren't all the places that fun can be found, but it is a good overview of the largest ones. The point of this section is to show that **Magic** is a very diverse game that allows many different ways for cards to be fun. For designers who have to make six hundred plus cards a year, this extra room to create fun cards is very helpful.

Pop Psychology Goes the Weasel

I've saved the most subtle consideration for last. You see, I'm the guy who came up with the Timmy, Johnny, and Spike classifications (Read my column "[Timmy, Johnny, and Spike](#)" if you have no idea what I'm talking about.), so it's safe to say that I look at the game in a very different way than most people. I'm very intrigued by the psychology of game players. What things evoke an intellectual or emotional response? How can specific cards affect how the players think or feel? What can I do as a designer that can have the net result of making all of you enjoy the game more?

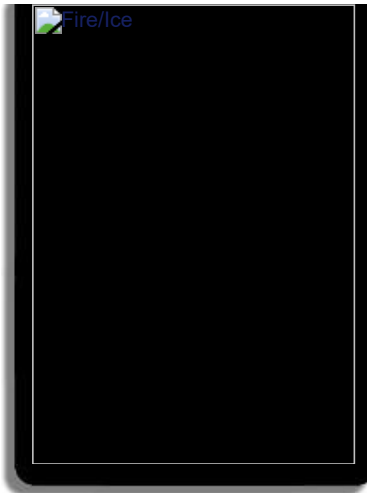
This is a very complex topic that would take far more than one column to explain, so I thought it best to use a single example to make my point of many of the issues at hand. Since HamHam was the impetus for this column, I thought I would take a look at my "Players actually preferred losing a card of their opponent's choice than losing one to the whim of fate" quote that he questions in his post.

So let's look at the quote. **Players actually preferred losing a card of their opponent's choice than losing one to the whim of fate.** What am I talking about? I think too many readers took the surface view of what I was saying. Given a choice between allowing my opponent to choose a card out of my hand or having one lost randomly, what would I choose? Random, of course. Because the random discard at least has the chance of missing my key card (and so too does the choice, but we'll get to that in a moment). That's not what I'm talking about in this quote. What I'm looking at goes a whole level deeper.

I'm not comparing the two choices against one another in a given situation. Rather I'm comparing the psychological response of each in an isolated experience against each other. Huh? In simple terms, I'm measuring how much fun or un-fun each type of discard is by itself and then comparing the responses. Here's how it works. I set up a situation. I then walk through the same situation with each of the different types of discards. For each version of the situation I'm going to examine the psychological response of the test subject. Note that this is all theoretical, but I'll work you through the logic.

Okay, here's the situation. We're watching a game between Stu and Barbara. Stu has five cards in hand, one of which will allow him to regain control of the game (let's imagine it's a [Wrath of God](#)). The other four cards aren't that important and Stu is okay losing them. Barbara plays a discard spell. In Situation #1, the spell will be a choice discard while in Situation #2 it will be a random discard. In each case, let's look at the best case and worst case scenario and we'll walk through Stu's reaction.

Situation #1 - Choice Discard



Best Case Scenario – Barbara looks at Stu's hand and choose a card other than the **Wrath of God** for Stu to discard.

Stu's Reaction – Absolute bliss. Stu knew that statistically he was doomed. His opponent had full information and had everything she needed to know the value of **Wrath of God**. Yet somehow, he managed to pull through this nightmare scenario. And Stu doesn't feel like he was lucky. Stu feels like he has an inferior opponent. Which pumps him up by making him feel like the better player. This, of course, reinforces his feeling that he deserved the break he got.

Worst Case Scenario – Barbara chooses to have Stu discard the **Wrath of God**.

Stu's Reaction – Accepted disappointment. This is what Stu assumed would happen when the spell was played. Stu is disappointed but not wildly upset. His opponent paid for the effect and fair and square got his card.



Situation #2 – Random Discard

Best Case Scenario – Barbara randomly chooses an unimportant card for Stu to discard

Stu's Reaction – Happiness. Statistically, this was supposed to happen (he had an eighty percent chance), but still Stu is happy to have things work out in his favor. The randomness created a little bit of drama that pumped his adrenaline.

Worst Case Scenario – Barbara randomly chooses the **Wrath of God** for Stu to discard.

Stu's Reaction – He's enraged. First, he lost his card and now realizes he's in trouble. But second (and this is the most important part), he's upset by the process by which he lost the card. His opponent didn't outplay him. His opponent didn't use any skill. She just got lucky. (I understand that random effects are not always pure chance, but psychologically they feel that way.) He held out his hand and she drew the **Wrath of God**. She could have just have easily pulled any of the other four cards. The reason she didn't? Dumb luck.

Let me digress to quickly talk about the psychological impact of randomness. Humans, by their nature, dislike adversity. But what really upsets them is not understanding why something happened. Victims (or relatives of victims) of crimes spend a great deal of time trying to understand why the crime happened. Having an answer, even if it's one you don't like, is actually more preferable to not knowing. Why? Several reasons. First, the known is always less disturbing than the unknown. This is why good horror writers don't go into great detail on their horrors. They'd rather let you fill in the blanks because they know that you can scare yourself easier than they can scare you. Second, humans like closure. Knowing why something happened allows them to move on. Unknown factors keep them stuck in the moment.

Let's take a look at the situations in question. In Situation #1, you lose the **Wrath of God** due to your opponent's skill of properly reading your hand. In Situation #2, you lose it because you got unlucky. It's much easier to move on from Situation #1. You know what happened. But Situation #2 just lingers. There's no concrete answer.

Situation #1 vs. Situation #2 – Best Case Scenario

In both situations Stu's happy, but in Situation #1 Stu's happier. Why? Because the odds were even more against him. There is nothing sweeter than victory in the jaws of defeat. Situation #2 makes Stu feel good, but he kind of assumed that's what was going to happen. He had a four to one advantage. In addition, winning in Situation #1 makes Stu feel like the better player. It boosts his ego and makes him feel good about himself. Situation #2 has none of that.

Situation #1 vs. Situation #2 – Worst Case Scenario

Stu's upset in both cases, but far more upset in Situation #2. Defeat in Situation #1 was expected. Situation #2 was more unexpected and it plays into the uncertainty that I talked about above. Stu understands why he lost in Situation #1. He has no such easy answer for Situation #2.

Thus, in Situation #1, Stu is happier when things go his way and less upset when they don't. This is where my quote comes from.

But wait, a few of you are thinking. Doesn't the best case scenario happen more often in Situation #2. Sure, Stu isn't as happy, but he gets a chance to be happier more often. While that's true, it doesn't play into how humans relate past experiences. Humans do not evaluate something by reviewing all the data, rather they tend to be driven by the extremes. For example, let's say you go to the beach and have a wonderful day. Then just as you are about to leave, you get stung by a jellyfish. How was your day? Horrible. The opposite example is that you go shopping and have the most boring of times. But somewhere in the middle of it you find an obscure CD that you've been trying to find for ten years. How was your trip? Excellent.

When you look at Situation #1 and #2, you have to look at the extreme. What's the strongest reaction created in Situation #1? Keeping your **Wrath of God** in the face of your opponent seeing your entire hand. What's the strongest reaction in Situation #2? Losing your **Wrath of God** when statistically you should have kept it eighty percent of the time. Situation #1's extreme is happy. Situation #2's extreme is upsetting.

Just think back to your own experiences with these two types of discard. What stands out? What's memorable? What caused you to tell stories about it?

As you can see, I did not come to my quote without thinking about the issue in great detail. And not just a surface evaluation but an examination of what psychological implication each type of discard had. It's this kind of psychological investigation that designers have to think about constantly. And it's not something that easy to notice in the finished product because it's woven into the game at such an unconscious level.

But it's there and we do pay great attention to it.

And that, HamHam, is why we focus on "fun". It's not as subjective as you think. And it is something fundamental to the experiences we're trying to create.

That's all for this week. Join me next week when I explain why a rose is a rose.

Until then, may you have some fun.

Mark Rosewater

*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.*



[Discuss](#) on the message boards



[Respond](#) via email



[Mark Rosewater](#) archive

[About Us](#) | [Jobs](#) | [New to the Game?](#) | [Inside Wizards](#) | [Find a Store](#) | [Press](#) | [Help](#) | [Sitemap](#)

© 1995-2006 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

