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By Any Other Name

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Making Magic
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Welcome to Name Week! This week we'll be exploring one of the often overlooked creative elements of Magic cards – names. Be sure to check out Matt Cavotta's feature article where he examines [what it takes to name a card](#). But I write the design column, so I knew I had to find design's take on naming. And then it dawned on me, I had an entire area isolated just for me – design names. (For those who don't know what I'm talking about, design names are the informal names the cards get when they are designed before the creative folk give them their official names.) The topic is a little frothy but then I've been a little serious in my column for the last few columns (Heck I wrote a [serious column about "fun"](#)), so I decided it was time for me to tackle an oh-not-so important, light weight topic. So sit back – you don't even need to buckle your seat belt for this one – and enjoy a peek into an area that I promise you very few people have ever examined.

Design Post Up Ahead

I guess I should start with the basics. Why do we even need design names? To answer that let me fill you in on a little quirk of our database known as Multiverse II ("The Time It's Personal"). If you put the names in the wrong field -- and as this field is labeled "Name" it's an easy mistake to make (there's two fields named "Name" if you're wondering; why? it's one of the great Multiverse mysteries, along with "why did you eat my card?" and "why do I have to play 'guess the three letter codename' every time I want to look at a set for the first time?"). As such, every once in a while we have a playtest where the cards have no names. For those of you that have never had this joy let me present a short play titled "Talking About The Playtest"

Me: So what did you guys think about the playtest?
Not Me: That green creature was stupid broken.
Me: Which one?
Not Me: It's a 4/5, I think.
Not Me#2: You mean the 4/6?
Not Me: I don't think it had 6 toughness.
Me: What did it do?
Not Me: It had the comes into play effect. (pause) The one that lets you boost your creature. (pause) With a +1/+1 counter.
Me: That one's not so bad.
Not Me: It is when you play the blue creature. The flier.
Not Me#2: Oh, the blue flier.
Not Me#3: Not Me#2, be nice.
Me: The 1/1 common one?
Not Me: I don't know what rarity it is. It untaps when targeted.
Me: There's a cycle of those. Common, Uncommon, Rare. When you say small, do you mean 1/1 or do you mean 2/2? The 2/2's the uncommon.
Not Me: I guess it's the uncommon. Man, those two cards, the green 4/6 or 4/5 and the 2/2 "untap guy" that flies. It's kind of crazy.

Now, let's re-imagine that conversation with names. Not even good names, just any names. Heck, bad names. Bad, bad names.

Me: So what did you guys think about the playtest?
Not Me: Mr. Giggle Stompstomp is stupid broken.
Me: Mr. Giggle Stompstomp's not so bad.
Not Me: It is when you play Pungent Bird Poop. Man, Mr. Giggle Stompstomp and Pungent Bird Poop together are kind of crazy.

No names just don't work. And the real names take a while. So design is stuck with coming up with ad-interim names. And by stuck, I mean, lucky as all get out. I love making up design names. So much so that I could write a whole article about it.

"Name! I'm Gonna Live Forever! (Or Until the Creative Team Gets Their hands On Me)"

Once we accept that we need names, we must ask ourselves what purpose design names fill. Oh look, a list: (Note that one, once I find a name I stop and that two, this order isn't set in stone; this is merely the most common order.)

#1 – They allow the designers to identify and talk about the card – I covered this one up above.

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#2 – **They help clue in other designers/developers/playtesters on what the card is doing** – Design doesn't do all that much templating. Designers just write what they think the card will say. And we're most often off by a significant margin. That and we shorthand things – “Sacrifice CARDNAME: Rampant Growth”. Oftentimes the playtest name helps clue in people playing on what the card's intent is. For example “Fixed (*insert old card name here*)” means “design making a more powerful and scary version of an already playable card”.

#3 – **They can tie connected cards together** – Often times it's hard to see how certain cards are connected in early playtest. Names like “Red Card in the Cycle” and “Yes, Another Creature with Non-Keyworded Mechanic X” can help.

#4 – **They entertain. Oh yes, they entertain** – Probably the most important role of the playtest name is the fact that we know eventually they will become public. And with magicthegathering.com always combing through R&D for old tidbits, it's just a matter of time. This puts a lot of pressure on the designers to try and be funny. Or pithy. Or sometimes just a wee bit insane. There was a time when we would occasionally make playtest names that were not, let's say, suitable for all ages and sensibilities (aka people that have the ability to be offended). We don't do those any more. I'd give you some examples, but well I can't. Maybe that gives you a little hint of naming back in the Wild, Wild West days.

A Crying Name

Time to get to the nuts and bolts. Let's talk about the various design naming techniques. To do this, I've created a sample card we're going to name:

Unnamed Card

3G

Creature – <Lizard>

2/2

CARDNAME must be blocked if able.

1G: CARDNAME gets +2/+2 until end of turn. Use this ability only once per turn.

Card Naming Technique #A – Try To Get An Actual Working Name

The very first thing I do when I'm trying to name a design card is to try and actually come up with a real name that might actually work on the card. Experience has shown me that if I spend more than fifteen seconds on this task, I'm wasting my time. So basically, I always start by seeing if some divine inspiration comes my way. Here's what I get in my fifteen seconds:

Hum of Bards – the idea here is playing into the fact that we've used music in the past as a flavor explanation of the lure mechanic. To express the idea that the creature can grow, I assumed there were a number of bards who rose and shrank. I then tried to get a collective term for bards. The trick is to try and pick a word that feels like it has something to do with the group but has a hint of collectiveness to it. “Hum” just felt right. This name took about five seconds. (Remember I've done naming for years – I've even led naming teams - so I'm probably much, much faster than the average designer.”)

Squirrel Horde – I don't know exactly what this has to do with the mechanic, but it came to me. And I do so love squirrels. Four more seconds eaten up.

Perfumed Otter – Another name that I don't know where it came from. I think I was trying to come up with another reason the lure effect might be happening. It's the animal kingdom, smell seemed cool. Why an otter? No idea. Three more seconds chewed up.

Musk Otter – Another variant of the name above. I don't know why I bothered as the last name stunk. The good news is that it only took a second. (And you can tell.)

And BZZT... time is up. I look back and do some quick evaluating. The otter stuff is right out. I like the name Squirrel Horde, but the more I think about it it's just not a perfect fit. Hum of Bards is the best I have. While I probably wouldn't go with it, I might depending on my mood.



Card Naming Technique #B – Try To Be Funny

Once the “real name” pass fails, I try to come up with something that is relevant yet funny. This pass has a lot less restrictions on it, so I allow myself thirty seconds.

Here's how I do:

Block Me Cause You Have To – I start with a name that tells my opponent what to do. Sometimes these are funny. This is not. Two seconds.

Walla Wonder – This is a **Magic** pun. It plays off the fact that the card is similar to **Rootwalla**. **Wall of Wonder** is an uncommon blue creature from *Legends*. Two seconds.



Hypnotic Squirrels – I was trying to explain why squirrels lured you in. The problem is the word “hypnotic” reminds most players of **Hypnotic Specter** which has nothing to do with this card. Three seconds.

Hypnotic Otters – I hadn't yet figured out the problem with the word “hypnotic”. And I still can't get my mind off the otters. One second.

Hypnotic Otters of Doom – Beyond every other problem with this card, “doom” sounds black. It is getting funnier though. One second.

Verdant Oprah – This came about because I was trying to come up with something that explained why the creatures keep growing and shrinking. Plus, she seems persuasive enough that she could make things want to block her. I added the word “Verdant” to make it sound green. And it took five seconds to come up with this crap, no less.

Used Card Salesotter – I was continuing to try and find a way to explain the lure effect. And I can't shake the otters. Three seconds.

Bard Bodies – Bad pun off the expression “hard bodies”. One second.

Pheromoneymaker – The “pheromone” part comes from me revisiting the idea that smell is causing the lure. “Money maker” is an expression and a famous pro poker player. Four seconds.

Rootwalla of All Evil – A Play on “root of all evil”. The problem is the card sounds black. (Black is the most common color of cards sound like that color instead of their own color.) Three seconds.

Static Cling-ons – Another justification of the lure effect combined with an odd roundabout *Star Trek* reference. Five seconds.



My time is up. While a few names could work in a pinch (Walla Wonder being my favorite), none blow me over.

Card Naming Technique #C – Use the Past to Functionally Name the Card

After I've spent forty five seconds making the creative part of my brain work hard, I move into a mental cool-down where I only need the part of my brain that remembers what old cards were named and what they did. You see, many new cards find their origin in one or more cards of the past. For this card, the influences are very straight forward: the card is **Rootwalla** crossed with **Lure**. So I take fifteen seconds and see if these two reference points make any acceptable names:



Alluring Rootwalla – This name crosses **Alluring Scent** with **Rootwalla**.

Bardwalla – This card crosses **Elvish Bard** with **Rootwalla**.

Tempting Rootwalla – This crosses **Tempting Lizard** with **Rootwalla**.

Taunting Rootwalla – This crosses **Taunting Elf** with **Rootwalla**.

Bloodscent Rootwalla – This crosses **Bloodscent** with **Rootwalla**.

Any of these names will work just fine. (It's interesting to note that I ran out of options before I ran out of time.) But sometimes after I see all the functional names, I decided to keep moving on for something a little different.

Card Naming Technique #D – Try Some Allusions

After the functional pass. I tend to do an allusion pass. That is, I look for names that are references to pop culture. This pass is another short fifteen second pass: (I've decided to stop listing the seconds each name takes because I'm having trouble believing anyone cares how many seconds it takes for me to reference a kids' dessert treat.)

Music Man – This is playing into the bard idea. It's a reference to a popular musical.

Band on the Run – Another bard/music riff. This is a song (and album) by Paul McCartney and Wings

Band of Brothers – Another “band” name. This is an HBO miniseries.

Otter Pops – Here's the kids' dessert treat. Man, the otters aren't letting go without a fight

Mystery Men – This is a comic book and movie (pretty funny ones, too). Not quite sure what it's got to do with this card. Of course, it's obscure enough that it could work just about anywhere.

I don't use allusions too often, but when I do it's always fun to see how many other R&D members get the reference.

Card Naming Technique #E – Alliterations

Eventually I get to the poetic section where I start playing around with words as, well, words. Another fifteen seconds:

Alluring Alligator – I begin by thinking of past words and then looking for an appropriate companion word. Alluring requires a green creature. So I went to the animal kingdom.

Beguiling Bard – This name went backwards. I started with Bard and look for adjectives that explained either the **Lure** or the **Rootwalla** effect.

Ballooning Bard – After the last name, I realized that both halves talked about the **Lure** part and neither referenced the **Rootwalla** part.

Taunting Tiger – I just keep getting the image of Tony the Tiger

Tempting Turtle – This name is flawed as Turtles are [really blue](#) (and yes, I know we've done [two green turtles](#)). It seems green got reptiles and blue got amphibians.

None of these excite me so I'm going to keep going.

Card Naming Technique #F – The Patented Mark Rosewater Legions of Superhero Design Naming Technique

At this point, things are looking dire, so I pull out my secret weapon. Yes, the Patented Mark Rosewater Legion of Superheroes Design Naming Technique. Here's how it works. Back in the 60's, DC Comics had a comic called *Superboy* that followed the exploits of a young Superman. For fans of the television show *Smallville*, this is where all the trapping of Clark Kent's youth (Lana Lang, Pete Ross, and even Smallville for instance) come from. In one comic, a trio of superheroes (also super teens) from the future come to ask Superboy to try out to join their super hero team. This little story would years later blossom into its own comic book complete with a giant team of teen super heroes (set, of course, in the far, far future).

One of the quirky conventions of the team was that most of the team members had very simple names all most all of which ended with Boy, Kid, Lad, Lass or Girl. (Another quirk is that many of the members come from planets where everyone has their super power.) Thus, when I'm stuck for a name, I attempt to name the creature as if it were a member of the Legion:

Bard Boy – He comes from a planet of singers/storytellers/mages.

Pheromone Kid – The girls love Pheromone Kid.

Lure Lass – You know she has a sexy outfit.

Rootwalla Girl – Not quite so sexy an outfit.

Otter Girl – She has the super power to keep recurring jokes going.

The clear winner here is Pheromone Kid. But let's assume that I wasn't yet happy.

Card Naming Technique #G – Running Jokes

When my back is to the wall I fall back to the old standard, running jokes. You see, a topic as serious as design card names has somehow proven a good breeding ground for recurring jokes. (No need for Otter Girl.) Some of the more popular running jokes:

Aura of Need – Whenever I'm in a rush to name an enchantment, this is my fallback name. I can't tell you how many cards at some point had this name.

Banned In France – In the early days, the French took upon themselves to ban cards that triggered off the top of the library (**Petra Sphinx**, **Sindbad** and **Vexing Arcanix**, I believe). Thus whenever I make one of these cards (and no better name comes along, I always name it Banned in France.

Bouncy, Bouncy – For some reason naming cards that return permanents to owners' hands is harder than most. Bouncy, Bouncy is my fallback name whenever I can't come up with something. It seems to show up almost every set I do.



Chaos-A-Go-Go – Usually once per design, I make a wacky red enchantment that just makes a lot of silly chaos. Out of tradition, I always call it Chaos-a-Go-Go.

Enchanto Lad – This is the Legion name that I've used more than any other. Every set seems to have some creature that interacts with enchants in some way. It's become tradition for me to name it Enchanto Lad.

Fat _____ - Whenever we take an activated ability that's best known as being on a 1/1 and put it on a fat creature we always call it Fat (whatever the 1/1 was called).

Man o' Mana – This is another common fallback name. This one is for creatures that tap for mana.

Stern _____ - Henry Stern dislikes coin flipping cards. So whenever we print one in a set I design, I always name it Stern (something).

Stone Rain Variant – At some point we were trying to figure out what effect had been tweaked the most number of times. For some reason (and I think we were wrong) we decided upon **Stone Rain**. For a while after this, we kept calling every **Stone Rain** variant, well, **Stone Rain Variant**.

Throat Wolf – In the early days of **Magic**, there was a running joke on the Usenet (this is before the web became big) of a super rare card named Throat Wolf. What the card did always seemed to change. The only constant was that it had Firstest Strike. For many years, we always named one card Throat Wolf in design out of a nod to that joke.

If by this point I don't have a name I resort to the final technique.

Card Naming Technique #H – Nonsense Names

This is when I stop trying to make the name have anything to do with the card. I don't do this one all that often. Some examples of nonsense names:

Abra Kadabra
Arrr!
Choo Choo
Fafa Foo
Mr. Spell
Poof!
Rim Shot
Slammin'
Thank You Sir
Zimmy Zowey

The Game of the Name

And that, my faithful readers, is how design names get named.

Join me next week when I shift from card names to codenames.

Until then, may you look a playtest cards with a little more knowledge.

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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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