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One With One With Nothing

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While it's only been two weeks for all of you since my last column, it's been a month for me. (What with writing my columns early with my trip to E3 and the Memorial Day respite.) In that time, I've run another Invitational (number nine – I feel old; ooh foreshadowing), turned a year older (38 for my stalker fans) and am mere days away from having my dream house finally finish completion (after numerous, numerous, NUMEROUS delays). I've come back refreshed. Refreshed enough to dive into a snake pit or two. Okay, two. Two snake pits today. You'll see.



I mention often in this column that I read every letter sent to me. Since I have no one to prevent me from being bluntly honest (this should be apparent to my long-time readers), I should revise that to say that I start to read every letter. And I make it through more than most of you would believe if you had a chance to see some of my mail. (As a quick aside people – brevity and clarity; the two most important qualities of writing a good letter; well, and a sense of the writer; the three, three most – wait, I did this joke two weeks ago, sorry) But I always read enough to get a sense of what issue that reader cares about. It is from my letter reading that I came up with one of my valuable public awareness tools – the twenty percent metric.

The twenty percent metric is a little rule that I've developed over time to tell me when an issue has hit a certain threshold. The rule is this: if one fifth (aka twenty percent) of my mail at any one time is about a particular topic, I need to pay closer attention to it because it represents a serious concern of the **Magic** public (or at least my readers, which is my most accessible sample group.) Today's column is about two current twenty percent topics, both of which concern *Saviors of Kamigawa*. Issue one is the keywording of channel and sweep. Issue two is the creation of *One With Nothing*. I will tackle both issues (or wrestle with them if I want to keep my snake pit metaphor going) in today's column. I will even admit to an R&D mistake. (Ooh.) So there's no turning back now.

Issue #1 – Channel and Sweep, What Up?

Several years ago, R&D revamped how it thought of keywords. I even dedicated an entire column to this decision if you're interested ("[Keyword to the Wise](#)"). The short version is that we had a fundamental shift in how we wanted our mechanics to be perceived. And please understand this issue is first and foremost about perception. We're doing roughly the same number of mechanics that we've always done. The difference is now we're labeling most so everybody can clearly see them.

My favorite example of why this is important comes from the design of *Urza's Destiny*. It was my one solo **Magic** design. There I was at the end of the *Urza's Saga* block. I was trying to find a way to extend the themes created in the block and perhaps add a little bit of a much needed power boost. (Federal regulations now require me to point out all sarcasm for our sarcasm-impaired readers.) (Which I would have to do again if any of the last sentence was true.) One mechanic that I played around with was cycling.



How could I advance cycling? Cycling 3? No, too radical. The idea I was interested in was trying to move cycling from the hand to another zone. The in-play zone being my choice. What if you could cycle cards from in play? What did that mean? You spent two mana and sacrificed the permanent to draw a card. Just like cycling in the hand works, you know, if you replace "sacrifice a permanent" with "discard a card". Conceptually though, the idea was pretty clean. And so I did it.

Urza's Destiny, in fact, had a number of these "cycling from play" cards. Not that anyone would know that. Because no one noticed. No one! (Okay, three guys who are going to mail me later today.) Every time I bring it up, I see the light go on in the other person's eyes. "Oh," they always say, "I did *not* see that."

Now, imagine I had keyworded them in some way which put the word cycling in the keyword (like what we did in *Scourge* with land cycling). It would have been this little cool thing for the players to enjoy. Heck, it even would have allowed the cards to intermingle with *Astral Slide* years down the road. The overall design would have had better focus. In a nutshell, that's the major reason behind our keyword conversion. R&D spends a lot of time and energy coming up with cool mechanics. We want you to notice them. And the interconnectivity between them. And if we don't connect

them, all the research shows the vast majority of the players don't see it. (I can't tell you how sick I was of hearing "Why didn't you put any mechanics in *Mercadian Masques*?")

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This is fundamentally why keywords matter. They raise public recognition of what is in the set. This does a wide variety of good things (go read my column on keywords for why), the best of which is that they raise overall happiness as players like it when they feel they get more.

Issue#1 – We're Not Done Yet

In business terms, this is what is known as “value added”. We want our consumers to be better aware of the features of the product. Because we believe if they recognize them (and in doing so allow us to create language to facilitate the conversing about said features) it makes the product more valuable. All businesses do this. Microsoft, for instance, doesn't want to revamp its operating system and have you not notice the cool new upgrades. Sony really likes it if you know all the cool things your new TV can do. And Starbucks updates its menu to reflect new products.



This is not idle speculation by the way. Since we started better labeling our mechanics, the public has been much more conscious of the mechanics. The positive mail (which far outnumbers the negative email) talks about how great it is that we've added so much to the game. But the negative mail is really the point of this column, so I'm going to take a closer look at them. I'll divide the complaints into two major sections.

Complaint #1 – “Stop making so many new mechanics”

We're not. We're doing what we've always done. We're just labeling them. (In all fairness, raw numbers of mechanics have gone up about five to ten percent in the last five years but nowhere near what people seem to feel it has.) This group loves to point out that *Invasion* block only had one mechanic – kicker. But that's not true. *Invasion* block had split cards, domain, the divvy mechanic, the upgrade instant spells, gating cards, battlemages, charms, familiars, volvers, sanctuaries. At the time we simply didn't keyword any of them. (And no, not all of them I listed would have been keyworded today.) All this on top of the fact that kicker is the most diverse keyword we've ever done in the history of **Magic**. The irony of this complaint is that it's a result of exactly what we set out to do when we revamped our keyword strategy: it's getting players to notice the mechanics. And it points out that many players didn't see the mechanics that were there before, thus creating this sense of mechanics inflation.

Complaint #2 – “Stop treating us like idiots.”

The next camp seems upset with the new keyword strategy because it plays into a common theme – stop dumbing down the game. My response to this is simple. The game is so complex, it needs all the simplification it can get. Everyone, for example, seemed to decry sixth edition rules when they were introduced because many players felt it was taking away so many of the idiosyncrasies that made **Magic** the game it was. As time has shown, the sixth edition rules helped make the game tighter, cleaner, clearer. Dare I say, better. As my keyword column explains, there are numerous benefits from being more liberal with keyword usage. One of the most important though is that it makes the game easier to understand. That group of cards? They all work the same. You don't have to scrutinize each one. I feel strongly that players have to see simplification for what it is. Not some evil force changing the game away from what they love, but rather an attempt to hone the game into something that can stand the test of time. Complexity solely for the sake of complexity is not good game design.

Keywords do so much good that it surprises me the fervor that they've been creating recently.

Issue #1 – Yeah, I'm Not Done Yet

Which brings me to the real point of this topic. You're right. We have gone too far. In our attempt to unify and identify our mechanics, I think we've stepped over the line. Not too far, but far enough that I think it's time for a little *mea culpa*.

It is my belief that in *Saviors*, we finally went too far. There is a keyword mechanic in the set that has no right having a keyword. Not channel. I feel that decision is correct. Channel is a mechanic with enough depth, numbers and play that I feel it warrants a keyword. I honestly believe it got caught up in the error of its partner in crime. Which brings us to sweep. What were we thinking?

Sweep fails as a keyword on a number of levels. First, there are just not enough cards to warrant a keyword. Four cards might be acceptable if we were planning to revisit it in the near future (remember that double strike started in *Legions* with just three cards), but sweep isn't what I would call a deep deposit vein of design. Second, the cards don't really have much value by being connected. You're not going to play the cards together. There's not a great need to talk about them as a subset. And, third, to be honest, they're really not up to snuff as something really worthy of a keyword. This isn't to say they're not interesting cards, but I think in our zeal to keyword, we finally went too far.

Wait, some of you are saying. How about number four – the cards could function without the keyword. I don't believe that's a valid reason not to keyword a mechanic. Flying, for example, could just be written out. It would fit on the card. But just because you can avoid the keyword is not a sign that the keyword doesn't hold value.



So what am I saying about R&D and keywords? Mainly this: We've been pushing in a certain direction for several years. *Saviors* has taught us that a boundary does exist. There is such a thing as keywording too much and R&D is trying to use the lessons of *Saviors* to help guide us in the future. That said, I believe the *Kamigawa* block had the right number of keywords. I merely would have dropped sweep and added spiritcraft (the cards that trigger off of a spirit or arcane spell being played).

Just like all of you, R&D learns about the game as time goes on. And part of the learning process is the occasional mistake. Don't begrudge us the mistake. It's an important learning tool. Begrudge us when we don't heed its warning. (AKA next time we make a "draw seven" card that needs to be restricted.) That's my message during this first part of today's column. We hear that you are complaining and at the core of your message is a valid complaint. As such we are taking steps to improve this process in the future. (Note that I'm using every ounce of my being to avoid a pun about "sweeping it under the rug".)

Wait a minute, you're admitting that keywording sweep was a mistake. Does that mean that **One With Nothing** wasn't? Cause you teased that "R&D even admits making a mistake". Not "mistakes". That's what you get

having a smart consumer base. We notice stuff like that. Are you about to tell us that a card that bad has a right to exist? Hold on. We're not there yet.

Issue #2 – One With Nothing – Honesty in Advertising

Okay. We're here. Into the snake pit, column boy.

For those unfamiliar with the card in question, let's start by showing it off in all its glory.



All of you that hadn't seen the card, feel free to take a few minutes to write me a nasty letter.

Back? Good. I thought a bit about how I wanted to talk about this topic and I've come to the conclusion that a question and answer format would work best.

Did R&D make **One With Nothing bad on purpose?** Yes. Hopefully, that's pretty apparent. The card was not a failed attempt by R&D to try and make a useful card. When we designed the card, it was our intention to make a bad card. No, not a bad card. I'm going to dub it a "bad bad card". What is a bad bad card? A card designed such that it is apparent to everyone that the card is grossly underpowered. (For more on why we print bad cards, feel free to check out my now classic column "[When Cards Go Bad](#)".)

Why would R&D do that?

The same reason we make any card. Because we feel it will add to the overall enjoyment of the game.

How does making a card that no one will play add enjoyment to the game?

Let me begin by challenging an assumption of the question. I do not believe no one will play the card. In fact, the card was designed to please a certain segment of the **Magic** community. I dub this style of player the uber-Johnny. (And I understand the uber-Johnny well as I am an uber-Johnny) Uber-Johnny, like the larger Johnny psychographic, plays to creatively express themselves. The Uber-Johnny takes this challenge a step farther. The Uber-Johnny wants to do things that no one has done before. So much so that he (or she) embraces cards that other players discard. He is attracted to the bad bad card like a moth to flame. He is the person the card is designed for. In fact, look through the threads talking about **One With Nothing**. People keep chiming in how they are excited about the card. This is the audience for the card.

But is making a small section of the audience happy worth upsetting the larger majority?

Yes. We do it all the time. The big expensive Timmy cards piss off Spike. The narrow Johnny rares upset Timmy. Whenever we make a **Magic** card, everyone that the card *isn't* meant for tends to get upset by it. In fact, the message "if you don't like the card it wasn't intended for you" is one of the most common themes in my column. The reason I keep hitting that point is that I believe players will be happier with cards they don't like if they understand that someone else really is getting enjoyment out of them. This is true with **One With Nothing**. There are people made happy by the card. Seriously, look at the threads on related articles (such as Brian Tinsman's feature on *Saviors of Kamigawa* – click [here](#) to see the article and [here](#) to see the thread).

In addition, please note that we make bad bad cards no more than once a block, often less frequently than that. There are other audiences that you are not a part of (and thus cause us to make cards you probably don't enjoy) that we make cards for on a much more frequent rate. If you're going after another psychographic group that causes R&D to design "useless" cards, the uber-Johnny is far down the list.

But isn't this card a slap in the face?

That was not R&D's intent. We do not make bad bad cards to piss players off. The opposite is actually true. It is our belief that the net result of their existence is a positive. For two reasons. First, as listed above, the card makes some players happy. Second, the bad bad cards have a good community building effect. Think back to the suckiest card we ever made (in your opinion). I'm talking about the card that you've ranted about for the longest time. The card whose name you've taken in vain many, many times. Would **Magic** be better if we went back in time and removed that card?

I believe no. The real wastes of cardboard aren't the ones that get noticed or evoke emotional responses (of any kind). They are the cards that no one remembers. The cards that didn't add anything to the metagame (and I'm talking both about the tournament scene and the larger community). **One With Nothing** is not going to be one of those cards. Yes, many people are going to hate the card. People are going to write horrible things about it. But the card is going to be memorable and it's going to add something to the overall **Magic** experience.

This is the important message of this column about **One With Nothing**. It was not created solely to piss you off. It was made because R&D felt it added something to the overall game, partly by making some players happy and partly by adding something to the **Magic** metagame (once again, using both definitions of "metagame") that would stir things up.

As always, I'm not asking you to like the card in question. I'm merely asking you to understand its purpose.

Exit Stage Left

While I always enjoy mail, it is this kind of column that makes me want to stress that I really do want to hear your opinion. There might just be an issue you care about that's only at 19.99%. In particular, I'm curious to hear your feedback to my feedback. Either privately or publicly.

Let me just leave by stressing that R&D spends every day trying to make **Magic** the best game it can be. Question our decisions, but please I hope you never question our desire to make the best game possible.

Join me next week when I start a little arcane mutiny.

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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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