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The Good, The Bad and the Ugly Truth

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Making Magic
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Very early in the life of "Making **Magic**", I wrote a column that helped shape part of the identity of what "Making **Magic**" was going to be about. That column was called "[When Cards Go Bad](#)" and it explained why bad cards had to exist. It set the tone for a certain segment of my columns where I explained the reasons behind unpopular parts of design.

The column went over well, but it generated a common response. Okay, many of you said, you understand why bad cards have to exist - but why do they sometimes show up as rares? I responded to this comment with a column called "[Rare But Well Done](#)" where I talked about how cards end up rare. I assumed I'd answered the question and moved on.

But over the years I'd hit upon the "why bad cards exist" theme (most recently in my column "[One With One With Nothing](#)" a number of weeks back) and I kept getting the same question. I realized that it was a slightly different question than I answered in my rare column. The question wasn't why do cards end up at rare. It was why can't R&D avoid putting *bad* cards at rare? Didn't I understand the futility of shelling out your hard earned money to open a booster pack and have the one item that holds the majority of the pack's value be worthless? Can't R&D understand how frustrating this is? Use the common and uncommons for the undesirable cards. For goodness sake, don't put any crappy cards in the rare slot. The question comes up again and again:

Why do there have to be bad rare cards?

Today, I will answer that question. And hopefully in a way that concretely explains why.

So, why do there have to be bad rare cards?

Short Answer

It's a necessity to meet other needs that R&D believes are more important to the game than the value proposition of any one booster pack.

Note that I'm not saying that getting a bad rare isn't an unpleasant experience. It clearly is. But it's necessary if R&D is to do other more important things for the game.

Long Answer

Since this is the long answer, I'll have the time to properly run through these "more important" needs. But before I do, let's take a look at the bad rare experience to see what is at the source of the unhappiness. You spend N amount of money. For this you expect eleven commons, three uncommons and one rare. While the commons and uncommons have some value (scaling downward based on how many packs you have purchased), the key item of value in a booster pack is normally the rare. Thus, getting a bad rare does two important things.

1. It's a bad value proposition. That is, you didn't get the value you feel you paid for.
2. It's a disappointment. **Magic**, as any game, is played as a source of enjoyment. Disappointment tends to lessen enjoyment.

Let's keep these two things in mind as we walk through the explanation.

Important Need #1 – Curbing Power Creep

R&D wants to keep the power level of the game consistent. While there will be variance from year to year (so yes, Mirrodin block was more powerful than Kamigawa block), the overall power level of the game is kept at an even keel in a long term big picture way. In simplest terms, all the sets, even those years apart, are designed and developed to have a similar power level.

This is important for several reasons. First, an unchecked power level will eventually spiral out of control and kill the game. All game designs have limits. While **Magic's** base design is very flexible, it does have its stress points. Push on one of these too hard and the game will collapse. (And no, I won't tell you what they are.)

Power creep negates the value of older cards.

Second, power creep negates the value of older cards. This makes it hard to mix the cards with earlier cards as the latest cards always have the edge. As number one of the bad rare issues is a fiscal one, it's important to note that power creep comes with an even higher cost than the occasional bad rare. In a power creep world, only the



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latest sets have any value because they've trumped everything that went before them. How would it feel to have every card you buy eventually become obsolete? In every format. (Well, all the ones we support anyway.)

Third, it plays havoc with design space. Let me demonstrate. Suppose you have the following card:

Seeking Wisdom
U
Instant
Target player draws a card.

Now in the next set, you have to make a better version. How do you do that? It's already one mana, so you have to increase the effect. Perhaps it draws two cards (and yes, I know we normally have cards that draw two or more cards be sorceries). The following set you have to make it better again. Maybe it's a cantrip. Or possibly it draws three cards. Just two sets later and already we're close to copying **Ancestral Recall**.



Those are the reasons that curbing power creep is important. Next we need to talk about execution. How does R&D do it? Most players agree that the power needs to be kept in check, but few really understand what it entails. This leads to the answer of another popular question – Why does Card X have to cost so much? If you just took off a few mana, it could be good.

This question plays into a common misconception. Cards don't live in a vacuum. To keep power balance, R&D has to keep expansions at a certain power level. Changing any one card in the system dictates changing others to keep the balance. To make that card better, and thus keep the power level constant, we'd have to make another card worse. A good parallel to this might be a sports team (such as football – or to you non-American readers, American football). You have so much money to put together your team. Sure you can pay one guy more, but if you do you have to pay another guy less. The budget is constant. How you spend it can vary but each decision affects all the other decisions.

Although this is not exactly the way R&D makes sets, I think it helps to think of each set as having so many “power points”. R&D can spend these as we see fit, but once we run out, we can't add any more power to the set. We can only redistribute. So why can't we just distribute most of the

power points at rare? Good question. It's almost as though you knew where I needed to segue to. Why can't most of the power points be stuck in rare? Important Need #2.

Important Need #2 – Spread the Power Amongst All the Rarities

Richard Garfield made a decision very early in **Magic's** design that the game's rarity wasn't supposed to be about power. Richard believed the game would be more accessible if players had the ability to build cheaper decks. As such, Richard wove into R&D's philosophy the idea that the good cards needed to be spread across all three rarities. R&D has held onto that vision to this day. Why? Because we want to make the game as accessible as we can to the largest group of players.

The reasons for this are twofold. First, from a fiscal standpoint, it makes **Magic** much easier to play. Let's assume we applied the “all power points at rare” strategy. What would happen? Well, the vast majority of the good cards would be rare. This means the cost of building a competitive Magic deck just went up. By quite a bit mind you. Yes, the individual pack opening experience might be happier (and also might not), but the larger deck building aspect of the game would become either a lot less fun or a lot more expensive (which I've learned is less fun for most people).

The second reason to spread the good cards across all three rarities is design functionality. Different rarities function differently. Not being able to put top tier cards at common and uncommon would keep R&D from making certain cards. An obvious example would be something like **Relentless Rats** that revolves around the player's ability to get a number of them. If **Relentless Rats** had to be rare, for instance, there's a good chance we just would never have made it.

Many other trading card games have tried strategies that put a heavy weight of “power” cards at rare. And you know what? Those games were just less fun because they kept the majority of players from having the depth of discovery that is so crucial to making trading card games click.

When you start to put the two needs together, you can begin seeing the problem R&D is presented with. There are only so many power points to go around and we want to spread them among all three rarities. This means that rare doesn't have the resources to make every card shine. All of the rares just can't be powerful cards. But wait, you say, can't the rares be low in power yet still be exciting? At least to someone? Yes, they can. Kind of. That leads to Important Need #3.



Spreading power across rarity makes the game more accessible.

Important Need #3 – Each set has to make all the different types of Magic players happy

One of the great qualities of **Magic** is that it allows each player to craft it into the kind of game *they* enjoy. Speed, focus, format, tone, goal, function. Almost all aspects of the game can be customized. This is a great thing for the players. It's a pain for the designers. How can you be all games to all players? The answer is diversity. We have to be careful to make cards for each segment of the audience. Now, there's a lot of overlap and we have the luxury that not every set has to be ideal for every type of player (assuming that we hit the mark a good portion of the time). Nonetheless, this is one of the hardest parts about designing **Magic**.

Cards that excite some players will upset others.

But wait, it gets even harder. Cards that excite some players will upset others, either because they don't understand the appeal or it impacts negatively on "their" **Magic**. Luckily, there's one final trick. If a card is very narrow and focused for a small segment of the audience we often hide it away at rare. This way, it mostly stays out of the way of the non-target players. And the people it's intended for will hear about it through the grapevine. News spreads fast when a segment of the audience gets excited.

So yes, we do try hard to make as many of the non-powerful rare cards as exciting as we can, but as rare tends to fill the narrow card niche, it means that a good portion of these narrow rares simply aren't going to excite the majority of the audience. To them, these cards are "bad" cards. Rare bad cards no less. But what's the alternative? Stick the limited relevant cards at rare and the narrow constructed cards at uncommon where they'll be more in the public's face (and even more annoying as they won't fill the function of what uncommons are meant to do).

To make my point I'll take the latest poster boy for bad card-dom, **One With Nothing**. Many players have written me stressing how they understand that the card has a place, but why does it have to "waste" a rare slot. Why can't it be uncommon? Well, for the sake of argument, let's say we did move it to uncommon. First, the card is now in even more player's faces. (There's some irony to the fact that so many players essentially said, "I hate this card; you should have printed more of it.") And every time they see it, trust me, they're not going to be happy.

Ah, but you say, players learn to ignore commons and uncommons. I don't buy it. I get a lot of e-mail. And in these e-mails, I get plenty of complaints about commons and uncommons. If players don't like something, rarity seldom seems to hold them back. For instance, one of the most hated cards back in the day was **Atog** (no really). I had a friend that would rip one up whenever he opened one up. (By the way, I'm not quite sure why the little "goat" inspired such hatred; I suppose because for a while he was the most printed card in existence and many players couldn't see any value in him.) Players complained and complained about why we had to make it common. Couldn't it have been uncommon? In a similar vein, when we make an extra sucky common, I get tons of complaints from the draft and sealed deck players that the card is a waste and annoying as it comes up so often.

Some players don't want the bad cards at rare. Others don't want them at common. (Although the "no bad rare" crowd is the largest; or at least loudest.) I'm sure I'll start getting letters from the uncommon lovers of the world begging me to spare that rarity as well. The point here is that **Magic** design dictates that we make cards that only appease a tiny portion of the **Magic** audience (which, by the way, the readers that participated in my "[Talk to Me](#)" column where I asked for specific feedback about **Magic** and the follow-up "[Say What](#)" showed that players are okay with cards that appeal to a tiny fraction of the audience). These cards have to go where the functionally make the most sense. Many of these cards are narrow constructed-only cards. No place other than rare (at least from a design utility standpoint) makes any logical sense.

Here's the odd psychological wrinkle. Players are fine with "good" cards that they'll never play. Let's assume it fits a style of play they don't enjoy or goes into a format that they don't participate in. The fact that the card has no value to them doesn't seem to bother them. But if the same is true for a "bad" card, they get all grumbly. The card's of no more use to them as the first card yet one gets them upset and the other they accept as a part of the game.

People, for example, used to get upset back in the day when they opened a **Lion's Eye Diamond** in their *Mirage* pack. Now it's considered a great pull. The card hasn't changed. Perception has changed. That's what a lot of this is all about – perception. Do I understand who else wants the card? If so, I'm happier to let it be. But if I don't – I get riled up. Curse you R&D. Why are you ruining my game?

Let me end this section with the following thought. Every card is for somebody. Even the bad cards. Even the horrible for the sake of horrible cards. Design made the card because they thought it added value to the game. Maybe not in the way you play, but in the way someone plays. Because **Magic** is many games for many people. But wait, R&D still has one more Important Need to work through.

Important Need #4 – Innovate, Innovate, Innovate

Another defining quality of **Magic** is that the game constantly evolves. Just when you figured it out, R&D pulls the rug on you and makes you start all over again. (For more on this idea check out my explanation of [the crispy hash brown theory](#).) The trick is that we have to keep changing in unexpected ways. If we followed preset patterns, the



players would figure us out. (You guys are a smart group.) That forces us to constantly try new things to keep you on your toes. We are forced to innovate.

This brings me to one of my biggest issues with the "bad booster opening" experience. When players complain about their unhappiness about getting a bad rare they miss what I consider the major function of R&D. R&D's number one goal is maximizing your happiness. (And by you I mean all of you not just you in particular.) Note that this is not the same as minimizing your unhappiness. We're trying to make you happy, but we're not consciously trying to make you never unhappy.

Here's why. Highs come with lows. If we're going to pull you up we have to expect that sometimes we'll inadvertently pull you down. Let me use a metaphor to explain (I never metaphor I didn't like). It is my and my wife's job to introduce foods to my children. Now, I could only feed them foods that I already know they like. And this strategy will definitely lessen their unhappiness. But in doing so I miss any thrill of discovery. No food tastes as good as the first time you taste it. Why? Because before that moment, that taste did not exist for you, and all of a sudden it does.

So I can try to offer my kids new foods that they've never tried but that I think they'll like. But there is an inherent risk to this strategy. They might not like the food. They might hate it. And eating food you dislike is as bad an experience as eating food you do like is good. One strategy (sticking only with the foods they already like) flattens the variance, ensuring that no one ever gets too upset. But at the same time, they lose out on the thrill of discovering new food.

Magic works under the exact same principle. Innovation is high risk/high reward. Maybe a new idea will work like gangbusters; maybe it will suck eggs. To use a sports metaphor, "If you never strike out, you're not trying to knock it out of the park." (How many metaphors can I cram into one section?)

What does this have to do with bad rares? Quite a bit. Because, you see, rare is the most fertile place for experimentation. Both because it allows the most complexity and because it creates the least spillover when it fails. R&D understands this and as such is much more likely to try out new ideas on rare cards. And some of the ideas, like my attempt to get my kids to eat vegetables, don't end up like you plan.

Focusing On the Forest and Not the Trees

Why do we make bad rares? Because we have to. Because making **Magic** the game it needs to be doesn't allow us the luxury to avoid it.

Power creep would kill the game structurally. Dumping all the power in rare would make the game inaccessible. Avoiding diversity would lose the audience. And failing to innovate would make the game boring. Making the occasional bad rare won't do any of the above. And that is why we do it. Because the things that matter, matter more.

My time is up for today, but I invite you either in the column's thread or in my e-mail to give your opinion on what I just said. Agree or disagree, I'm curious to hear.

Join me next week when I'll be examining a game within the game of **Magic** that's been going on for over twelve years.

Until then, may you notice how all the things that seem to be disconnected really aren't.

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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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