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State of Design 2005

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Making Magic
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In December of 2003 I took over the reins of Head **Magic** Designer. During that first month I spent a lot of time thinking about what things I wanted to do as Head Designer. One idea came very quickly. Once a year I wanted to have a "State of Design" column. Much like the US president's State of the Union speech, it would give me a chance to let all the players know how I, the guy in charge, saw the state of **Magic** design.

I liked the idea but I realized that it needed to be delivered at the beginning of the "Magic year" which happens at the end of the summer/beginning of the fall (the time right before the start of a new block). And last summer I was all ready to write my column when Randy Buehler brought up a very important point. R&D works a year ahead. If I talked about design as it applied to R&D, I would be talking about things that the players wouldn't see for an entire year. As soon as Randy pointed this out I realized that I had to wait a year to start.

Which brings us to today. Today is that column, because *Ravnica* is the block that marks the beginning of my time as Head **Magic** Designer. It is my hope that I can explain where I feel **Magic** design stands and then explain where I see the game moving under my rein as Head **Magic** Designer. Sound interesting? Then keep reading.

The State of Magic Design

Let me start by saying something hopefully obvious. **Magic** design is in a very good place. Now, I'm going to spend most of this column talking about what I feel can be improved in **Magic** design, but please don't read that as any indication that I feel **Magic** design needs major fixing. **Magic** design is healthy and thriving. I just feel as the Head Designer that it's my job to constantly strive to improve **Magic** design. And that is what I'm doing. How? Good question.

To understand where **Magic** design stands today, I have to start with a little history. I've talked about this topic before in my column, but I feel it's important enough to what I'm going to say that I'm going to go over it one more time. As I see it, **Magic** design has gone through three distinct stages:

First Stage (from Alpha through *Alliances*)

In the beginning, **Magic** design was very much about the individual card. That is, attention was paid to make each card as rich as possible. The cards were flavorful, evocative, and created a sense of awe. That was important, as the game was in its infancy. And remember, nature makes babies cute on purpose. **Magic** was beginning its phenomenal debut and to do that the game had to appeal on a visceral level, which meant it had to be cool. (Not to say that it doesn't have to be cool now – it does – but modern day **Magic** is more about the conglomerate of the design than just the individual card; although don't worry, we will still make individually cool cards – whew, this is a long parenthetical aside)



There was no official Head Designer title in this first stage but its function was filled by a combination of Richard Garfield and the East Coast Playtesters (Skaff Elias, Jim Lin, Dave Petty, and Chris Page – the designers of *Antiquities*, *Fallen Empires*, *Ice Age* and *Alliances*). The great success of the first stage was obviously its ability to turn **Magic** into a monster hit. Overnight it captured hundreds of thousands of gamers (later millions) and made the trading card game genre a core gaming staple.

The downside of this type of design is that it sacrificed larger connectivity. The color pie, the rules, templating, etc. all suffered from the problem of each issue being decided card by card. As **Magic** started to mature as a game it needed some cohesiveness to help pull everything together. Players, for example, had to have tools that would allow them to play without memorizing an unabridged rulebook. Templates had to be consistently used to allow players to understand what the cards did. And the color wheel needed to be more rigidly defined to keep all the five colors from blending together. **Magic**, in short, had to start growing up.

Second Stage (from *Mirage* through *Prophecy*)

The second stage was defined by the creation of the block. Rather than design set by set, R&D would start to think of each year (well, "Magic year") as its own entity. The three sets (one large and two small) would share mechanics and flavor and would be designed to be played together in limited. Ideas brought up in the first set would be expanded upon in the second and third sets, allowing the designers the freedom to evolve their designs over multiple sets.



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The Head **Magic** Designer of this stage was Joel Mick. In addition to the creation of blocks, Joel did a lot of necessary housecleaning. For the rules, Joel pushed for a major clean-up and revamping which would lead to the *Sixth Edition* Rules that the game is now played with. Joel took steps to codify templates to make sure that each mechanic and ability not only read the same on every card but was worded in a manner to make sure players could figure out what it meant. The color pie was also cleaned up but as we will see the major work on that would come in the next stage.



The weakness of this stage was that it created blocks that were very undefined. Yes, the sets had keyword mechanics and settings, but they lacked a more holistic approach that would give the sets a discernable and marketable identity. In short, the sets couldn't just be more of the same each year. They had to be about something.

Third Stage (*Invasion through Saviors of Kamigawa*)

The third stage's innovation was the theme. Blocks were all given a crystal clear identity that not only made the sets easier to understand by the consumer but also made them easier to design by R&D. (For more on the importance of themes, feel free to check out my column on the importance of themes, "[Lions, Tigers and Bears](#)")



The Head **Magic** Designer of this stage was Bill Rose. Besides creating themes, Bill took a great deal of time finding ways to improve on all aspects of the game from tweaking the sets to improve limited play (both in sealed and draft) to instituting loose quotas to make sure that the different styles of players received "their cards" each set to tightening and reevaluating the color pie. It is my opinion that the third wave was the wave of the most significant gains in design technologies.

That said, what room can there be for further improvement? We'll get to those in a minute.

The other important point I need to make is that everything I'm talking about is going to start in *Ravnica*. You won't need a year to see the changes I'm talking about. No, previews for the new order start next week.

See The Pattern

As I thought back on **Magic's** design history, it dawned on me that each major innovation of the game came under the reins of a different Head **Magic** Designer. The observation was a little scary but also a little exhilarating. I'd worked for years to earn this position. Now that I had it I wasn't about to rest on my laurels. I needed to do what every Head **Magic** Designer had done before me: take **Magic** design up a notch. Luckily I had a few ideas.

Before I continue, I'd like to make a quick aside about my predecessors. My desire to constantly improve the game is not in any way meant as a slight towards the work of those who came before me. Quite the opposite, actually. To quote Sir Isaac Newton, "If I have seen farther than others, it is because I was standing on the shoulders of giants."

One more time for posterity before I jump into constructive criticism, **Magic** design is in one of the healthiest places it's ever been. This is due to the accomplishments of Richard and Joel and Bill and the scores of designers they oversaw. That said, there is room for improvement.

When I first took the Head Designer position, I asked myself the following question: What element of design can be done better than it currently is?

As I thought about it, I realized that I was asking the wrong question. The real improvement didn't come from doing anything we were doing better, but rather from doing things we aren't doing now. After a great deal of thought I came to the conclusion that there were three areas that I wanted to put my energy towards. All three areas were of equal importance in my mind, and to a certain extent all three are related as well.

Okay, okay, enough with the build-up. What am I going to do to bring **Magic** into the Fourth Stage of **Magic** Design?

Step #1 – Institute Block Design

If you trace the evolution of **Magic** design, you'll notice that it keeps expanding its focus. In the beginning the focus was on individual cards. Then sets. Then blocks. But while we've been creating themes for blocks for years, we haven't really been designing blocks. We've been designing sets that go together, but not really blocks as an entity.

To explain this problem, I'm going to have to compare **Magic** design to television writing. (If I'd been a plumber before joining Wizards of the Coast, you see a lot of metaphors about pipes and, well, things plumbers do – what do I know about plumbing?) When you're writing an ongoing series, there are two ways to do it. First is the "loose ends" technique. The way this technique works is that you always write your stories to leave unresolved issues

(aka loose ends). Then when you get to the next part of the story, you find a loose end you like and expand upon it, always, of course, leaving new loose ends.

The second means of telling ongoing stories is the “plotting” technique. In this technique you plot out the major structure over a long period of time (usually an entire season but sometimes even longer than that – *Babylon 5* being one of the best examples of long range plotting). You figure out the small details as you go along but you know the big picture so you allow yourself to set up things that you specifically know will pay off later.

Both techniques work fine, but I feel the plotting technique better rewards the faithful viewer, as future events are crafted such that things pay off better in the long run. In the loose threads techniques there are often many threads that are never resolved. The advantage of the loose ends version is that it requires less work up front and it allows more people to write the show in question as they don't need to have as firm a grip on the big picture.

Magic design up to now has been more “loose ends” than “plotting”. That is, sets don't map out the future as much as provide areas to hook on to. (The one exception to this is *Invasion* block, where we set up the enemy color twist of *Apocalypse* from very early on) Now, if I ran a television show, I would clearly plot it out. Why would I handle **Magic** design any differently?

What this means is that from now on **Magic** blocks are going to be plotted out. The lead designer of the large set is responsible for structuring the entire block. This doesn't mean they'll design each set, but the major structure and themes will be set up to guarantee that the block feels like a cohesive unit rather than a bunch of connected sets.

Let's take *Ravnica* as an example. Once you see what we've done with the block you will notice the difference. It is crystal clear from the moment you open your first *Ravnica* booster that there's some master planning in progress. Now, this doesn't mean that we've taken all the surprise out of it. The structure will hint at pieces of what we're doing while leaving other entire sections completely in the unknown. Like any good television show, we're letting you know what kind of ride to expect but we're not giving away every curve in the upcoming road in the process.

There's not much else I can say other than you'll have to wait and see what I mean. It's a different approach, but I think you're really going to like it.



#2 – Design Between Blocks



I feel that themes were a crucial advancement in **Magic** design. That said, time has shown us that themes carry some baggage. In R&D we've referred to this as the “block problem”. Our themes of recent years have been so insular and focused that we've created a world where decks evolve from a single block. Standard has devolved into decks from Block A fighting decks from Block B. This is bad. **Magic** design needs to fix it.

So what do we do? Stop doing themes? Heavens no. The problem isn't themes. It's how themes are executed. We need to re-evaluate how we use our themes. “Theme X is important, play a lot of theme X”, for instance, has proven problematic. It forces players to so overload their decks on the theme that cards that aren't hyper-focused on the theme have no room in the deck.

The first step is softening the focus. Our themes will push in more broad directions. Rather than force a single style of play, the themes will encourage general areas of interest. As you will see next week as previews start, *Ravnica* is pushing players in certain directions but with much more freedom to select how they embrace the theme. There will still be a thematic message from the block, but it will come with a wider set of tools to utilize it.

The second step is to take what I said up above about designing wider and taking it to the next level. Not only will the designers have to design between sets, they will have to design between blocks. We're getting an earlier jump on future blocks to make sure that the designers know where we are going and allow them the ability to set up the next block. *Ravnica* will follow up on *Kamigawa* block (although be aware that not having this done on the reverse side in *Kamigawa* makes this a bit of a challenge) as well as set up *Snap* Block.

The end result is to ensure that every Standard block is its own entity mixing Block A and Block B rather than merely pairing them off against one another.

#3 – Design and Creative Integration

This last change is probably the hardest for the public to see but it is equally important. When I was promoted into the role of Head **Magic** Designer, I was also put in charge of the Creative Team. Why? Because R&D wanted to more integrate the two. In the past, design and creative tended to be done in sequence. That is, one group finished their work before it was handed off to the other (usually design first, creative second, although that was swapped in *Kamigawa* block). But *Ravnica* was truly the start of a new system.

For *Ravnica*, the Creative team was brought in from day one of design. The very mechanics we selected were chose to interweave with input we got from the Creative team. And the result is something truly awesome. *Ravnica*'s flavor radiates through every element of the card set including the mechanics. Just playing with the cards will teach you elements of flavor. And I'm not talking about looking at the pretty pictures. The act of the mechanics themselves will demonstrate key things about the flavor of *Ravnica*. I hate to keep going back to the "you'll just have to wait and see what I mean", but it really is the kind of experience you'll literally have to feel for yourself.

City of Dreams

I take being Head Designer very seriously as I feel it comes with a huge responsibility (and great power, but then those two come hand in hand, at least that's what Ben Parker wants me to believe). **Magic** has done so much for me that I'm eager to return the favor. I want to make **Magic** the best game it can be. And I'm excited with the direction that the game is headed. I can't even put into words (and remember, I'm the word guy) how proud I am of *Ravnica*. The set does everything I've outlined above and more.

So when you start looking at the previews (starting next week if you haven't gotten any of my subtle hints), keep in mind the issues I've laid out today. And remember that *Ravnica* is just the beginning. Fourth stage, here we come!

Join me next week when we start previews for *Ravnica* (for goodness sake, haven't you been paying attention?)

Until then, may you know the joy of shaping something you love.

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.*



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