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Twenty Questions

Mark Rosewater
Making Magic
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I guess I'll start with the question on everyone's mind. Why are you interviewing yourself?

Well Mark, I'm glad you asked. In my ten years working in R&D, I've done my fair share of interviews. I've done interviews for professional magazines, professional web sites, not-so-professional web sites, convention panels, school projects, inquisitive interns, etc. Several years back I even did an interview in "Making Magic" where I let all of you interview me ("[Inquiring Minds Want To Know, Parts I & II](#)"). And during most of these interviews (but not yours, you guys actually asked some pretty good questions), I notice somewhere in the middle of the interview I start thinking to myself "Man these aren't the questions I'd ask."

Well, today I am going to put that thought to the test. Today I *am* going to ask the questions I'd ask. Literally. Stick around. You might learn a thing or two.

What does it take to be a good *Magic* designer?

Several things, in no particular order (other than the order they popped into my head): creativity, persistence, belief in oneself, ability to communicate, knowledge of *Magic's* past and present, appreciation of elegance and aesthetics, persistence, an understanding of basic psychology, a healthy ego, innovation, an ability to get along with other people, a willingness to think outside the box, a willingness to think inside the box, persistence, problem solving abilities, some salesmanship, a sense of the dramatic, a thick skin, a sense of humor, and just a little bit of stubbornness.

What is the biggest misconception players have about what designers do?

Let me use a metaphor (after all, what is a metaphor for if it's not for helping explain things). Most people think that designers build houses. We don't. We build architectural tools. The players build the houses. Sure, we have some idea what kinds of things the players might be able to build with our tools, but we don't set out to create tools to build a particular kind of house. Or in *Magic* terms, we don't set out to create deck archetypes. We don't build decks and then hide the cards in the set. We just make interesting open-ended cards. Of course decks will follow. We don't need to do that. We shouldn't do that. That's what millions of players are paying for the right to do.

What do you know about *Magic* that the average player doesn't?

The biggest thing I know that most of you don't (because you don't have to) is what makes a good *Magic* set. A lot of players think they know, but I believe they are confusing their ability to judge what they like or don't like with the ability to understand what they would need to do to recreate it. Think of it this way. There are plenty of movies and television shows you enjoy, but without proper training, you can't just make one. (I had training, and it was still hard.) This is why I find outside articles about the inner workings of *Magic* very entertaining. I like seeing what many of you think makes the game tick. (I've found many useful insights in seemingly innocuous articles.) Lastly, just because I'm capable of understating doesn't mean it isn't a lot of work.



It also helps to have the right wardrobe...

What is your greatest strength and weakness as a *Magic* designer?

My greatest strength is my ability to think holistically. That is, my ability to see the big picture that explains how all the separate pieces connect to create something larger than their sum. My greatest weakness is my greatest strength pushed too far. (As I believe all greatest weaknesses are.) In my desire to link things I have a tendency to overlink. My sets tend to be overloaded with synergy. So much so, that it can complicate gameplay. The good news is that I understand this weakness and take steps to compensate in my designs. (Having a development team always checking up on me never hurts.)

How have you affected *Magic*?

I think my biggest influence has been the push towards the bigger picture. Block themes, block planning, inter-block planning. Oh yeah, and I've designed thousands of cards.

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How has *Magic* affected you?

I'm not sure I have the space to answer this question, so I'll just give you the Cliffs' Notes version. **Magic** is directly or indirectly responsible for every current good thing in my life. **Magic** brought me to Seattle. **Magic** introduced me to my wife. **Magic** gave me the financial means to raise a family of five. And last, but not least, **Magic** is responsible for giving me the best job I will ever have.

How do you feel *Magic* design has changed in the last twelve years?

It's evolved. Each design improves every design that follows it. As we do more and more design we have a better understanding of what works and, equally as important, what doesn't work. As technology improves, the following two things are true: One, the designers are able to do more with less. And two, the more we understand design technology the more important the aspects of elegance and aesthetics have become.

What does *Magic* have left to do?

I'm often asked how long **Magic** design has left. When will we exhaust all the possibilities? The answer? Never. **Magic** has an insane amount of depth. And even if we find the bottom of this rich vein (which I doubt will happen in our lifetimes), just mixing and matching the things we've already found will last far longer than the trees needed to make the cards. Can I give specifics on what **Magic** will do in the near future? I don't want to. The surprise of the new cards is an important part of the **Magic** experience. Suffice to say that the next few years will throw a few things your way that I guarantee you're not expecting.

What can players do who want to get a better understanding of what makes *Magic* tick?

First and foremost read "[Making Magic](#)" (It's not the most important piece, but hey if I can't self-plug in my own column, where can I?) and any other well-written piece on the topic. (Aaron Forsythe's "[Latest Developments](#)" is another very good place to look.) Next, read every **Magic** card. Go on [Gatherer](#) or [Magic Online](#) or the encyclopedias/player's guides and just read every card. You want to know what **Magic** is capable of? Then you have to see what it has done. Then talk about **Magic** with other people who share an interest in the structure of the game. There is no better way to form your own opinions than bouncing them off other people. Finally, play as much as you can. (**Magic** theory is great. **Magic** in practice is even better.) While doing so, think about all the issues you discuss outside the game. Marry the theory to the practice.

What is your biggest pet peeve as a designer?

I hate people that reject ideas on principle. I'll suggest a new idea and they explain why it can't possibly work. Theoretically. I'm sure there was some guy who spent hours telling the Wright Brothers that a plane can't possibly fly. It just can't be done. My response is always some variant on "Well, let me do it and I'll get back to you."

Do design failures upset you?

Not really. **Magic** is all about trying new things. The essence of exploring the unknown is that oftentimes things don't go as planned. The biggest failure in my book is never failing. If we never fail, we aren't pushing boundaries hard enough. A close second to that is making the same mistake twice. I don't mind paving new ground, but tripping on paved ground is kind of embarrassing.

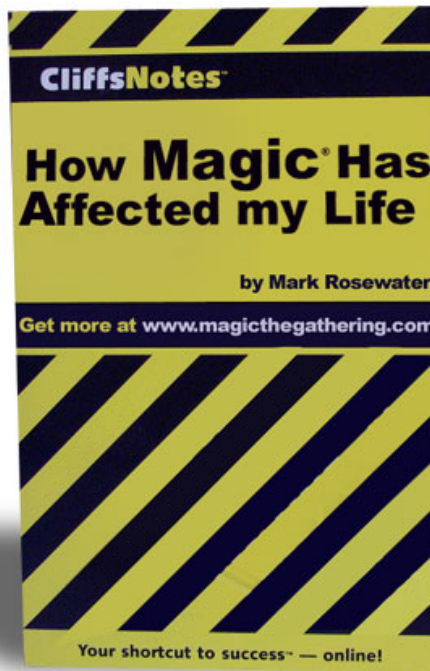
Do you ever grow tired of *Magic*?

I'm going on ten years and I can honestly say I haven't. I think the reason for this is that **Magic** is an ever-evolving game. It's like asking if I ever grow tired of my children. How can I? Every day is a new experience. What **Magic** was in its youth is not what it is today and it won't be what it is tomorrow.

How often do you play?

It varies. When I'm in the middle of a design (or the occasional development) I play a lot more than I do otherwise. In general I play a lot more of "design" **Magic** than I do of printed **Magic**. That said I do make an effort to play with real product. Stickered cards are nice and all but it's not the experience of playing with the real thing. Having three young children means that most of my **Magic** playing is done at work, but I do have spurts where I play at home, especially when my father (who my regular readers know plays **Magic**) visits.

How much interaction do you have with the public?



As much as I can. Back in the day, I used to spend a great deal of time traveling to allow me to meet as many **Magic** players as I could face to face. But with my family obligations, I don't travel as much. I do try to make it to local events (especially prereleases) as much as I can. But my real lifeline is my e-mail and the bulletin boards. When I say I read every e-mail I'm sent it's not just out of the goodness of my heart (although I do have a pretty good heart). I feel my e-mail is my best barometer to what all of you are thinking. If an issue matters to the public, I hear about it. This is why I can't stress how important it is to take the time to write to me if you have something to say about the game. I'm currently one of the most influential people in forming **Magic**. And I give my ear to anyone who takes the time to talk to me. If you care about a topic, tell me. I can't act on knowledge I don't have.



Why are you so egotistical?

I guess the blunt answer is because I am. I'm not trying to create a persona in my column. I'm trying to accurately demonstrate who I am. And this is me. That said, I think the word "egotistical" is a rather biased word. While there are negative aspects to having a large ego, it is not strictly a negative. For example, I feel my egotism plays an important role in what I do. You see, the role of head designer is to create vision. And then you need to sell that vision to the rest of R&D. In order to do this, you have to really believe in your vision. You have to have a lot of confidence in your instincts. You have to have confidence in yourself. Having a healthy ego makes this possible.

Does it bother you that so many people don't like you?

Let me start by challenging the assumption of the question. I don't think a lot of people don't like me. I think that I embody different concepts for different people and that many people don't like the thing that they feel I represent. And you know what, I understood that when I signed up for this gig. People like to vent. If I provide an easy target for venting, then I'm just doing my job as a spokesperson for the game. I really don't take it personally. (See "thick skin" in the answer to question #2.)

What do you take personally?

The comments that matter the most to me are how **Magic** affects the players. I design cards because I want to create a positive experience. Hearing that I've succeeded feels great. Hearing that I failed, while less enjoyable, does allow me important criticisms I need to do my job better. The most important letters I get are the personal ones where someone shares with me how **Magic** has affected their life. I take those letters personally because they are personal.

If you weren't designing *Magic*, what would you be doing?

I'm honestly not sure. I'd be creating something. Probably a story of some kind. I might still be in Hollywood hopefully running my own television series (and I've got a great idea that I'll make use of somewhere). Or maybe I'd be a novelist. Or a comic writer. What I do know is that it would be doing something that was creative, that made people happy, and that made me happy (and supported my family). But that's only hypothetical, because I'm not going anywhere.

What would you like the players to know about you that they don't currently know?

That's a toughie. After writing almost two hundred columns (some of them quite personal), I'm not sure what I haven't shared. I guess if I had to pick one thing it would be this. I'm ecstatic to finally be the Head Designer. And I feel it's my role to not play it safe. I want to surprise you; I want to shock you; I want to do things that you haven't even thought of. I want to take the game into new directions. Not in a way that dishonors or contradicts the past, but rather in a way that evolves it from where the game has already been. I'm stepping up my game. I hope you all are ready.

Well, I hope this interview has given you some insight. And if you like this kind of thing let me know. I might have a few more questions for myself up my sleeve.

Join me next week when I talk about a guild that isn't afraid to die.

Until then, may you find questions to ask yourself.

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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