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# Once More With Feeling

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Making Magic  
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For my second favorite column, I picked my favorite "design philosophy" column of the year. If you are at all interested in really understanding trading card game design, this column is fundamental.

Being that this is a **Magic** design column, I like to occasionally talk about, you know, **Magic** design. Today is such a day. (Note that the column that I hinted at last week is being put off for a few weeks as I figure out the logistics to make it work; but don't worry I promise you'll like it once its done.) My goal today is to let you in on an aspect of **Magic** design that most players don't think about. In fact, I think it's something that many players feel we do out of necessity or laziness rather than as a conscious choice. What am I talking about? Repetition.

I'm as much a **Magic** internet junkie as anyone. (And I lurk like nobody's business so if you say something about **Magic** I just might read it. Of course, I do read all my e-mail so there's always an easier way to catch my ear.) I like to see what people say about the game. And there's one theme that pops up from time to time. Did you ever notice that Card A is just really Card B dressed up in new clothing? And we did it the year before as Card C, and Card D before that. And hey, why do we trot out the same effects every year to stick on the new block mechanic? Can't we come up with anything more original?

Can we? Yes. Should we? Sometimes, but definitely not always. Why? (All you aspiring card designers out there, get your pencils ready.) Because repetition is fundamental to good design. I'm using strong words on purpose. I'm not saying that repetition is valuable or useful. No, I'm calling it *fundamental*. As in you can't do good design without it. What do I mean? I'm glad you asked. This is the fun part about having a design column. This is where I get to explain what I'm talking about. Why is repetition so important? Let me count the ways.

## #1 – Humans Are Just Built That Way

I talk a lot about psychology in my column because psychology is fundamental to good game design. (Repetition, psychology – is everything fundamental to good game design?) And psychology tells us the following: people fear change. As a result, they cling to things that are comfortable and known. (This by the way is the basis for much of communication theory.) Why do people read the newspaper? A very famous study showed that the number two reason is to get news. The number one reason? Because they do it every day.



What does this have to do with card design? Well, trading card games, **Magic** in particular, are about change. They constantly reinvent themselves to keep the players always rediscovering and exploring. So, trading card games are all about change, and people fear change. On the surface, this would appear to be a real problem. But it's not. Why? Because trading card games aren't really about change. Well, not exactly.

To explain this I'm going to borrow an example from my past: sitcom writing. Why do people watch television? If you guessed to be entertained you get a cookie. (And if you guessed because that's what they always do, you get a whole box of cookies – thanks for paying attention.) What's entertaining? They want something new yet familiar. The same basic problem that you see in trading cards. The audience wants a new show every week, but they want something they already know. Thus was born the television series.

Did you ever stop to wonder why television has series? Movies predate television. When television first showed up, why didn't it just show movies? Because, television is in the home and thus is very easy to watch. Movies, in short, couldn't keep up. Television demanded more programming in a week's time than movies made in a year. In addition, people's desire for familiarity forced the entertainment makers to find a way to make something new yet familiar. Luckily they had radio to steal from and they made the television series.

The idea behind a television series is simple. Every week (or every day for something like a soap opera) you return to watch the same characters in the same setting handle the same types of issues in the same style and format. It's new every week, but in most of the important ways, it's the same. The *Friends* are going to sit in the coffeehouse and chat. Somebody's going to need emergency surgery on *ER*. And on *CSI*, there just might be a murder. And not just any kind of murder, but something offbeat. That is the secret of good entertainment: variations on a familiar theme.

**Magic** is no different. Yeah, we want to be different. But not too different. Don't expect to see a block next year where land doesn't exist. Or one where the rules just work differently. (In case you missed "Latest Developments"



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[last Friday](#) Mark Gottlieb has finally cemented his role as my official arch-nemesis by securing the role of **Magic** Rules Manager – he's order to my chaos. Except in playing against the stereotypes, chaos is the good guy. Kind of like *Antigone* – hey if it works for Greek theater who am I to complain?) The pendulum can swing, but only so far.

## #2 – Focus People, Focus



What form of genre fiction does **Magic** design most resemble? Many of you would probably guess fantasy because **Magic** is a fantasy based IP (intellectual property). Of course, you would be wrong. What about horror? No. (Well, perhaps for the **Magic** Rules Manager – bwah ha ha ha – oops, did I do the evil villain laugh? I'm not the villain. And there's really no hero laugh. I guess heroes find things less funny than villains.) **Magic** design is most like science fiction.

Why? Because **Magic** design is all about the “what if”.

You see, science fiction is about exploring possibilities. As a form of literature, it's very introspective. It takes a small idea and expands the world around it. **Magic** design works the same way. We begin by imaging a world that is slightly different from the world you know. (“What if players had easy access to all five colors? “What if card disadvantage wasn't so disadvantageous?”, “What would a world be like where color played a reduced role?”, etc.) This gets you your hook. Once you have your hook, everything else needs to be as close to normal as you can get it.

Let's go back to the world of television. You have a sitcom. You're trying to come up with the idea for a new show. Here are some options. You can introduce a new conflict. You can introduce a new character. You can introduce a new setting. You can introduce new group dynamics. What you don't do is introduce all of these at once. If you want to introduce a new ongoing character, you want to do it in a familiar setting. If you're going to go to a new setting, bring along the normal crew of characters. Give them their normal problems but in a new setting. Wherever you stretch your week-to-week premise, ground it with the familiar.

**Magic** works the same way. If you're focusing on one aspect of the game, keep all the other aspects as normal as possible. This allows the players the ability to focus their energy on the foreign element without distraction. This way the game is about what you, the designer, want it to be about.

## #3 – It Is What It Is

So why does there have to be red direct damage variant of the block mechanic in every block? Because that's what **Magic** does. That is what **Magic** is. Red blows things up. Every year. If red didn't blow things up, it wouldn't feel right. The block mechanic is the new thing. Red blowing stuff up is the old thing. We're talking chocolate and peanut butter in an old Reese's commercial. They're going to get together. In fact, if they didn't it would be disconcerting.

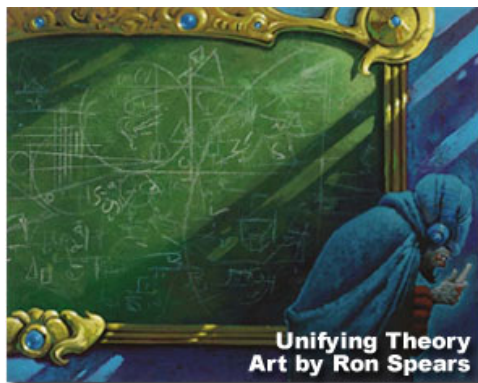
Once again, let's jump back to good old television. Imagine you flipped on *Seinfeld* to discover that it was a special serious episode where something “big and important” happened. You'd be upset. Because that isn't what *Seinfeld* is about. You don't want the show about nothing to be about something. You want a show with something? You'll watch a different show. You came to Jerry and company for nothing. You want major plot points revolving around pieces of candy. **Magic** is exactly the same way. (Well, except that **Magic** isn't about nothing and things seldom revolve around candy.)

A lot of focusing goes into the designers surprising the players. But equally important is the designers delivering what the audience expects. **Magic** is very much about certain things. The color wheel. The mana system. The rules. These can all be messed with up to a point, but in the end if the designer doesn't deliver the key elements the player expects, the designer will have failed.

## #4 – The Secret Formula

Repetition plays out in many forms, but the most important is possibly the least visible. Yes, I'm talking about the structure of the format. Not individual card design. I'm talking set design. Block design. Inter-block design. The big enchilada. To explain this point, let's return to good old television. (And you all thought my old job had nothing to do with this one. Pfah! *Roseanne*, the show not the actress, trained me well.) The first thing you learn when you set out to learn about sitcom writing is the format. And by format, I mean the very elaborate structure. Sitcoms are very short (twenty-two minutes in prime time) three act plays. Not some sitcoms. All sitcoms!

The same is true no matter what medium you choose. Formulas are an intrinsic part of the creative process. For example, let's say you want to write a romantic comedy. Guess what, a lot of it is already planned out for you. You're two main characters are going to meet sometime during the first act. They are going to have a horrible first meeting and hate each other. There will be a major obstacle for one or most often both of the characters. One, most likely both, will be in another relationship. But something isn't quite right. They're not fulfilled. And the very



thing they want, the other person has it. I'll stop now, but this formula goes all the way through until the end. (Hint: They've broken up but they each come to realize that they miss that very thing that the other person had that they were lacking in the first act in their old relationship. There will be some physical distance that is covered where one of them can proclaim this realization to the other.)

Why can't someone write a romantic comedy and not follow the formula? Because it's what the audience expects. And yes, there is a little room to fiddle, but as I said above, everything else has to be by the book. Audiences (aka players) like comfort. They want to have an understanding what to expect. And here's the most important piece. Having a formula doesn't restrict creativity. Aha, my favorite theme. Yes, restrictions breed creativity. True creativity comes from working within the formula. Think of your favorite romantic comedy. Odds are they followed the formula. But they found ways of making it their own and using the formula to create something bigger and better.

**Magic** is no different. Players have a lot of expectations about what a set or a block is about. Designers can fiddle a little but in the end, they have to deliver what the audience expects. And those little twists, by the way, are all the difference. It is the subtle nuance in the execution of the formula that defines the design.

## Once More With Feeling

Repetition is not a crutch. It's a tool. A very important tool. Good designers learn to respect that tool. So next time you think to yourself, couldn't R&D come up with something different, try asking yourself a different question. *Why* didn't R&D come up with anything different?

That's all I got for today, but if you take a few moments to really think over what I said, I think you'll find I snuck a lot into two thousand words.

Join me next week when I explain what my dad had to do with one of the most popular sets of all time.

Until then, may you learn to appreciate what you don't have to think about.

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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