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Life Lessons, Part II

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Making Magic
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Two weeks ago, I began a column inspired by lessons in my life and how they impacted both my own life and that of my **Magic** design. If you haven't read it, it's required reading for today's column. (The "Part II" thing might give that away.) Click [here](#) if you haven't had a chance to see it yet. Alright, everyone's read "Part I"? Then on to "Part II".

Lesson #6

"Part I" was focused on my pre-Wizards days. "Part II" begins with a trip to Seattle. My journey to Gencon got me in as a freelance writer for *The Duelist*. From there, I started getting freelance projects from other parts of Wizards (doing quality work and turning it in time will do that with a company that's growing faster than it can handle), including R&D. For some of the projects, I was flown up to Wizards' corporate headquarters in lovely Renton, Washington. (We're still in Renton, but we've moved buildings twice since then.)



The coolest part about these trips is they gave me a chance to hang around with the Wizards staff. At the time, Wizards was a young company that was riding the tornado that was early **Magic**. The work kept growing, outstripping the abilities of the staff. This led to a lot of freelance work and a lot of hiring.

So there I was one day, hanging out with R&D. I had been flown up to do a "how to play" project for the International Department (for Germany, if I remember correctly), and I was taking a break. The R&D guys were trying out some new Nerf technology and testing how good it was. (Nerf wars were known to spontaneously break out back then.) By now, I knew everyone, as I had been to Renton and several conventions multiple times. While helping test out the new Nerf machine gun, I made the following innocent comment: "Wow, I could see myself moving to Seattle."

Later that day, I was approached by Mike Davis, the then VP of R&D. He asked if I'd like to go for a walk. I said, "Sure." Here is my memory of how the walk went:

Mike: So I understand you'd be willing to move to Seattle.

Me: Uh, yeah.

Mike: When could you start?

Me: I don't know. A month or two. Are you offering me a job?

Mike: Yes, and no. More yes than no. R&D needs more bodies, and I've heard good things about you. But there is a bunch of HR red tape. So, you want to work at Wizards?

Me: Um, okay.

The astute reader will notice the "uh" and the "um" before any of my positive replies. Why exactly did I hesitate to say yes? Because I hadn't given it any thought. I hadn't expected my comment in R&D to create such a response.

Yes, I was intrigued to work for Wizards, but everything happened so fast that I was a bit thrown. You see, my destiny was to create great television shows. Yes, I was having a rough spot, but being a writer in Hollywood is all about rough spots. I had my future planned out and it included living in Los Angeles and being a television writer.

Nonetheless, the lure of Wizards was strong. I was, after all, a **Magic** geek. The idea of making **Magic** was attractive. But then... so was following my dream of creating a television series, so I turned to my friends. Mind you that at the time, my friends were divided into two camps: **Magic** friends and non-**Magic** friends. Here's the response each gave.

Magic friends: Oh my god! Oh my god! You said yes, right? That's awesome. You think you can get me free cards?

Non-Magic friends: You're thinking of moving to Seattle? For that game? How long is that thing even going to last? What about your writing?

The first group couldn't believe I was even questioning the decision, and the second group was skeptical, which left me where I started. The "HR red tape" proved to be plentiful, and I ended up having over a month to make my decision. During that time I spent a lot of time thinking it through. In the end, I came to the following conclusion:

You can't be inflexible with your future

Round Three: The Angel of Wrath vs. the Minotaur Hero; the Clouded Mirror vs.

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It was all well and good to want to be a television writer, but that desire shouldn't preclude that I might be something else. It's great to have a plan, but I couldn't allow the existence of the plan to negate anything that didn't fit into the plan. As the saying goes, if you have a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. I couldn't let my vision of becoming a television writer keep me from exploring other options. Such as being a game designer.

The more I examined the situation, the more I found that there were aspects of Hollywood that frustrated me (the wild swings of fortune, the hot/cold nature of the business, the attitude the environment created, etc.). My desire to be a television writer came from a place of wanting to use my creativity to make something that people appreciated. Being a game designer fulfilled that need. It wasn't what I had thought I was going to do with my life, but I had to approach the issue with an open mind.

Obviously, in the end I chose to take the job. It is one of the most important (and I believe best) decisions I have made in my life. I've never looked back on the decision with any regret. (Okay, there are a few moments when I watch a great television show where I wonder what might have been.)

This leads us to how **Magic** design applies to this lesson. When you begin a design, you often start by assuming certain things. First, you tend to have a theme. We knew going into *Ravnica*, for example, that we were creating a multicolor block. But as the design continues, you have to let it have a life of its own. Things you planned might come to fruition and they might not.

For example, the theme we ended with for the Snap block (this year's fall set) was not the theme we started with. Yes, it's an aspect of the theme we began with, but midway through the design we realized that different sub-theme was taking center stage. Now we could have pushed that aspect aside in our quest to fulfill our initial goal, but I believe doing so would be detrimental to creating the best design possible. (I promise to explore this aspect of Snap design when the set comes out.)

The point is that sets evolve over time and a designer has to allow that evolution to happen. Themes and goals are great tools when design begins, but you cannot let them keep you from letting the design move in the direction that organically makes the most sense. Life and design are very much about the journey. If you end up someplace different than where you set out for when you started, that's okay.

Lesson #7

About a month after I started at Wizards I went to Cleveland for Thanksgiving. For those that don't memorize every little factoid about me, I grew up in the suburbs of Cleveland in a little town known as Pepper Pike. Not only was it Thanksgiving, but it was also the ten year reunion of my high school (Orange High School for those of you that remember my "[Hanging with Roy G Biv](#)" column). Even though I didn't have any great friends from my high school (high school, while not being the hell that was grade school or junior high, was kind of uneventful for me), I've always found it fascinating how people change over time, so I was quite excited to go. It didn't hurt that I had just started what I considered to be the most awesome job ever.

The event proved quite memorable - I had a chance to connect with all sorts of people I hadn't seen in, well, ten years. I learned that **Magic** wasn't as well known as I thought. Whenever someone asked me what I did, I explained that I worked on **Magic**, to which nine of ten people replied, "What's that?"

The tenth person? They knew. Either they, or more often their spouse, was quite familiar with the game. I think **Magic's** recognition among non-gamers has gone up quite a bit in the last ten years. (Pokemon sure didn't hurt TCG awareness.), but none of this is what this life lesson was all about. No, this life lesson hit me from a place I never expected.

While I was chatting with different people, Betty walked up. I wouldn't say that Betty and I had really been friends in high school, so much as acquaintances. We were both involved in theater and, as such, had some overlap. She and I never (even in a group setting) did anything together outside of school. We were friendly, but more for the fact that we shared a similar extra curricular activity.

Anyway, I'm standing there when Betty walks up to me. She says, "Mark, I'm so glad you could make it. I've been wanting to talk to you. You probably don't remember this, but on my sixteenth birthday, you gave me a birthday card. Something you made yourself. You were the only person the entire day - actually for that entire birthday - that acknowledged it. I was in a bad place at the time, and it really meant a lot to me. I just wanted to let you know that."

I don't remember the card in question, but hearing the description, I can piece together what happened. I'm sure I heard that it was her birthday and threw together a quick handmade card, for no reason other than I thought it was a nice gesture. It had no larger context to it. I did it on a whim.

What really hit me about this encounter (enough so, obviously, to be included here) was how much something I did that was such a little deal to me, was such a huge issue to some else. Which leads to this lesson:

The little stuff matters

You don't get to choose what defines you - you are the sum of everything you do. You might focus on the big things, but the little things matter just as much. My entire relationship to Betty was defined by an act so small that



I can't remember it. That didn't lessen its impact on Betty, and it taught me the importance of taking the things that matter down to the smallest detail.



This lesson couldn't be more connected to **Magic** design. I'm always obsessing on little details in a design and I'm often told, "No one will notice."

My reply is always, "Someone will notice. Someone always notices."

What makes good design isn't just the big picture, but the tiny executions. My favorite example of this is the kicker ability from *Invasion*. In design and development, we decided to differentiate colorless mana kickers from colored mana kickers. The idea was that adding colorless mana could make the effect bigger, but only colored mana could add an additional ability. For instance, a direct damage spell that did extra damage (i.e. **Breath of Darigaaz**) would be kicked for colorless mana, while one that added an extra effect, such as "cannot be regenerated" (i.e. **Scorching Lava**) would need to be kicked with Red mana.

There was much debate at the time if such a differentiation was necessary. A year later when the set came out, I noted how multiple articles that talked about kicker pointed out this detail. And in each case it was seen as a positive sign that R&D cared so much about the details, which, as a designer makes me feel great, because I do care. Little things, in fact, do mean a lot.

Lesson #8

In "Topical Blend #1: To Err Is Human", I shared [lessons of my love life](#). My final lesson dealt with how I started my relationship with my wife. Things went so well that they led me to this lesson, and it all begins with the **Magic** Invitational, then known as the *Duelist* Invitational. The first Invitational was held in Hong Kong (for more info on the Invitationals, you [can click here](#)) and went smashingly well. So much so that the Invitational grabbed the notice of other foreign offices. Before we knew it, the second Invitational was planned for Rio de Janeiro.

At this point, Lora and I had been dating for over a year and it was going quite well. So much so, that I arranged to fly Lora to Rio for the Invitational. We then planned to stay an extra week for sightseeing. At some point, the following dawned on me: if I was ever going to propose to Lora, Rio would make an awesome backdrop. Only one problem. I hadn't yet decided if I was going to propose. But with the pieces all set in motion, I decided I better figure it out.

In the end, I made a Pros & Cons list. It went something like this:

Pros

- I love her
- I think she'd make an excellent wife and mother
- We seem to want the same things out of life

Cons

- Maybe I can do better

When I was done, I looked at the two lists. I got really mad and ripped the Con list up. And that's when I realized the following:

"I Can Do Better" is the path to ruin

While it is fine to strive for improvement, there is a fine line between striving and never settling. Anything can be better. Even good things. Really good things. Like Lora. She's human with human foibles. In some hypothetical sense, the "better" wife is out there. But to what end? My goal wasn't to find some pinnacle "best" wife - my goal was to find someone who would complement me. Someone who would make me happy and share my life with me. Lora had all that. In spades. And my Con list drove the point home. I asked her to marry me in the ocean on the Playa de Pepino. (It's a good story, but I'll have to save it for another time.)

The **Magic** design offshoot of this lesson is straightforward: Any design file can be improved. With time, you could tweak a design until you die, but at some point you have to figure out when you've accomplished what you set out to do and stop. It is very easy for a designer to fiddle with a design. The hard part is knowing when your "baby" is ready to take his first steps on his own. At some point in a design, every designer has to rip up his own "I Can Do Better" list.

Lesson #9

And from my happiest lesson, I turn to my saddest. Just before my eldest daughter, Rachel, turned two, Lora and I noticed that she had begun bloating. We took her to her doctor to figure out what was wrong. His first inclination was allergies, so he gave her some medication that would help alleviate the bloating. When the bloating got even worse we returned. It wasn't allergies. The doctor identified the problem right away. My daughter had a kidney condition known as Nephrotic Syndrome.

For those unfamiliar with the working of the kidneys, their main job is to act a sieve to let out unnecessary elements from the body. Rachel's kidney was mistakenly letting protein out. Protein is far from unnecessary. In fact, without it, the body starts breaking down, ultimately leading to organ failure. Her bloating was the result of her body holding in water to avoid going into shock. To put this condition in context, let me explain several things. First, Rachel has the least severe version of the condition. Statistically speaking, she should outgrow it by adolescence.

On the flip side, the treatment for the condition is only slightly less rough than the condition. It requires that she take a steroid known as prednisone. The side effects of the steroid are mood swings, a giant increase of appetite, and a possibly adverse effect on bones, eyesight, and growth. I've known two different adults who were prescribed prednisone. Both discontinued it prematurely, as they couldn't handle the side effects. In addition, the condition requires a low sodium diet. Salt, it appears, puts stress on the kidneys.

The condition is rather rare. When I asked my doctor how rare, he said that in his thirty years, a general practitioner would probably only see it once. The condition is so rare that the kidney specialists don't really know what causes it. As an example, when Rachel was first diagnosed, they said it wasn't genetic. Evidence since then has hinted that possibly it is. Here's the scariest factoid. If I had gotten the condition when I was Rachel's age, I would have died. That prednisone counteracts the effects wasn't figured out until the late 1970's.

Suffice it to say, hearing Rachel's diagnosis was a low point for me. For those of you that aren't a parent, watching your child in pain is twenty times worse than any pain you can experience yourself. Especially when it is a young child that can't even understand what is going on.

Life lessons can come from all sorts of places. This one came from a very sad place. I spent a lot of days trying to understand why. In the end, I realized the following:

There are things that happen that you simply have to accept and move on

I didn't like what happened to my daughter. I could spend hours wishing it away. But in the end, I had to accept it and learn how to live with it. Anything else was wasted energy.

This couldn't be more true with **Magic** design. There are all sorts of things that you, as a designer, have no influence over. There are things that you must simply allow to exist and design around.

A more concrete example of this is the Reserved List. You see, many years ago, Wizards released *Chronicles* and *Fourth Edition*. In it were cards from some of the recently released sets that had sold out in hours. As such, cards from these sets had high secondary market values, many of which plummeted when they got reprinted. This upset many of the collectors, as they feared that the value of their collection might evaporate overnight. To stem these fears, the then **Magic** Brand Team came up with a list of cards that Wizards promised they would never reprint. Over the years, the list was reshaped a few times until *Mercadian Masques*, when the **Magic** Brand Team (a different set of people) decided to stop adding cards to the list.

The Reserved List has become somewhat of an albatross around R&D's neck. The largest frustration comes from the fact that we don't even believe the Reserved List is doing what it was created to do in the first place. Evidence has shown that releasing an old card in a new environment tends to raise the value of the old card, not lower it. The few that it lowers are cards that are relevant in larger environment formats (Vintage, Legacy, etc.) due to their power level. And those cards, we aren't interested in reprinting, partly because we think the cards are too powerful to reprint, and partly because we value having a healthy secondary market. Evidence of this can be seen in how we handle cards like *Mana Drain*, which we are legally allowed to reprint (it was an uncommon in *Legends* and thus not on the Reserved List), but don't.

Here's the real problem. Wizards made a promise. Even though all of the people involved in making the promise are gone, the company is not, and Wizards of today has to honor the word of Wizards of yesteryear. This is because we want the word of Wizards of the Coast to *mean something*. This means we have to accept what is and move on. We need to use our energy to figure out how to work around it, rather than continually question why it has to be. Only by moving on can we find peace.

Lesson #10

When I talked about Lora and I being compatible in the lesson above, one of those things was an agreement on how many kids we wanted. Two. Enough to allow each child to have a sibling, but still keep things manageable. So I'll admit I was quite shocked the day that Lora and I went in for the first ultrasound. There were two sacs in the ultrasound. "How does

one baby have two sacs?" I asked.

"It doesn't," the technician replied with a smile.

It is seldom in life that you truly understand the magnitude of a piece of news when you first hear it. "You're having twins," doesn't have that problem. You understand instantaneously the gravity of the news. Lora and I





were speechless. Now twins run in my family (my mother's a twin), so my family was quite ecstatic. But days later, Lora and I were still in shock. It was during this time that I made an important realization. You see, ever since the creation of the Pro Tour, I've been involved with it. Up until Rachel's birth, I had never missed a Pro Tour, and even after, I held the record for the most attendances.

But leaving Lora at home with one baby five times a year was, while tough for Lora, doable. Three kids? I couldn't do that. This meant that I had to give up the Pro Tours. I weighed options in my mind. Perhaps I could convince my mother to visit each time a Pro Tour occurred... But as I was plotting out how this would work, the last life lesson of today came to me:

Having priorities doesn't mean anything if you don't actually prioritize them

I've always said that family is the most important thing to me. If that was truly the case, then I actually had to put family first. In the end, Lora and I decided that I would travel twice a year - once to the Invitational and once to Worlds. We got my mom in on the plan and all was good. I definitely miss the travel and the Pro Tour, but what I get in return makes me sure of my decision.

What does this lesson mean to **Magic** design? It means that a designer has to understand what is important in the design. Everything cannot be of equal value. When two things conflict, the higher priority has to win out. As an example, let's look at *Ravnica* block. The top priority of *Ravnica* block was the guild model. This meant that the design teams had to figure out the flavor of each guild. Individual colors might have been interested in having certain effects, but the needs of the guilds superceded that. As an example, tutoring is part of Black's flavor. But Black in *Guildpact* doesn't get any. Why? Because tutoring was a large part of Black in *Ravnica* because of the Dimir guild. *Guildpact* Black had to surrender it in order to allow *Ravnica* Black to have it in greater number.



The Lessons Come To An End

I hope you enjoyed this two-part column. Perhaps a few of my insights (into life or design) might prove valuable to some of you. As I stated at the end of "Part I", due to its personal nature, I am particularly interested in your feedback on this column. I will, as always, read each and every letter.

Join me next week when the entire site will do something completely different.

Until then, may you have some life lessons of your own.

Mark Rosewater

On An Unrelated Note

Let's call this the eleventh life lesson: When you're asked to pick candidates for the Writer's Vote for the **Magic** Invitational, you do it the week you're assigned whether or not it has anything to do with the rest of the column. (If you have no idea what's going on for this year's **Magic** Invitational, click [here](#).)

Here's how this thing works. A pool of **Magic** writers (both online and print) were given the opportunity to vote on a list of candidates that represented the "best combination of talent and personality". It was up to us to interpret what we felt that criteria meant (and don't worry I didn't vote for Mike Long). Here's the list of players we were allowed to select from:

- Tim Aten
- Jeff Cunningham
- Antonino De Rosa
- Gerard Fabiano
- Tsuyoshi Fujita
- Sam Gomersall
- Mark Herberholz
- Craig Krempels
- Osyp Lebedowicz
- Masashi Oiso
- Neil Reeves
- Jeroen Remie
- Tomoharu Saitou
- Tomi Walamies
- Gabe Walls

In the end, I tried to select five players that I both respected as a player and enjoyed as a spectator. It was tough, as many of the people listed above fit the criteria quite well (which explains how they ended up on the ballot). My choices are clearly subjective. But hey, that's what I'm being called to do, be subjective. One last thing, even though the name "Writer's Ballot" refers to the people who are voting, I did give players that write an extra bonus. In my mind, the better an audience knows you the better they "get" your personality. This doesn't mean you had to write to get on my list (you'll see one person doesn't write) but it gave you a leg up.

So without any further ado, my list for 2006 **Magic** Invitational.

Number 5 - Tomi Walamies

I find Tomi very entertaining. I mean how many pro Magic players are also stand-up comedians? (And as someone that's done stand-up comedy, I know how hard it is.) In addition, when Tomi writes, his stuff is very good and very entertaining. He gets the talent portion by Top 8'ing the one pro tour he showed up at last season. The reason Tomi is number five is that he needs to do more. He needs to write more often and he needs to show up at more pro tours.

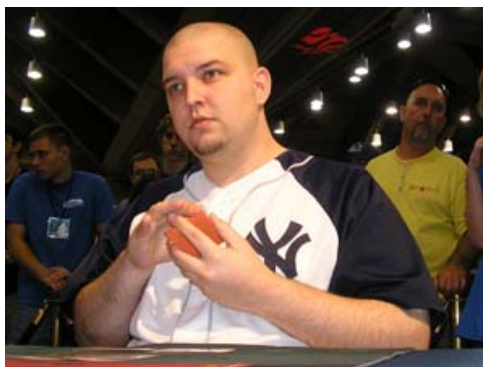


Number 4 - Antonino DeRosa

Antonino has always been entertaining. He cracks my list this year by backing up his good-natured personality with actual performance (he is American's current reigning champion after all). Before this last season, I don't think Antonino got a lot of respect for his Magic playing ability. This year he put himself on the map and is in contention for the title of Best Current American Magic Player. Antonino also takes time and energy to write. While I don't always agree with what he has to say I support the fact that he takes the time to say anything. I find it disappointing how few pros actually take the time to write.

Number 3 - Neil Reeves

Speaking of not writing, Neil is my one pick that I don't believe has ever written anything (if so, sorry Neil). How'd he make the list? A lot of talent and a lot of personality. Whenever I watch Neil I always feel like I learn something and I'm always entertained. My only regret is that I would love to see Neil write, as I would be fascinated to see what he has to say. I always enjoy talking with him, but the average Magic player doesn't get that opportunity, which is another reason I wish he would write.



Number 2 - Tsuyoshi Fujita

Tsuyoshi is another player oozing both personality and talent. What got him to my number two slot is that he does something that few other players do, which entertains the Johnny in me to no end: He makes crazy decks and then he actually plays them at pro tours. That takes a lot of personality and a whole lot of talent, particularly given how well he does with those decks.

Number 1 - Osyp Lebedowicz

I don't think Osyp is the most talented person on my list, but personally (I said I was being subjective) I find him the most entertaining. Having him at the Invitational takes the enjoyment level up a notch. His enthusiasm is contagious. And the man knows how to have a little fun. He's even an amazing writer. (Although I'll continue the theme of "I'd like to see him write more.") For all that, Osyp gets my top bid.

There you have it. Stay tuned for later in the week (BDM's "The Week That Was") to see who wins the Writer's Vote.



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