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As Good As It Gets

Mark Rosewater
 Making Magic
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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Let me begin by explaining that I had a topic I'd been planning for several weeks. I wrote the first draft of the article and it became apparent to me that the topic wasn't working. So at the last moment I had to audible and switch to a new topic. (I'll work with this other topic, but it's going to need a new approach if I'm going to make it work, so it might take some time.) It isn't a theme week, so I can write about anything I want. You know, unless it doesn't have anything to do with **Magic** (and even then, a few loose connectors and even that flies occasionally). Easy as pie, right?

Ever wonder why we have a theme week every other week? There are a number of reasons, but one of the most important is it's a helpful tools for the writers. It's hard coming up with a topic week in and week out. The theme weeks help guide the writers to ideas. (Remember my mantra – restrictions breed creativity.) What this means is that I was stuck on my own for this week. All looked lost when I flashed back to an interview I did several weeks ago.

I've worked for Wizards for eleven years come this October and during all of it I've been what's known as a "front man." That is, I'm a public face for the company. Through my writing (starting in *The Duelist* and working its way through a myriad of related products up through magicthegathering.com) I've always been closely associated with **Magic** and Wizards of the Coast. As such, I get asked to do a lot of interviews. Which is fine, as I enjoy talking about **Magic** (it's not really a good idea to write a weekly column about **Magic** if you don't).

The interesting thing about interviews is how often you get asked the same questions. It's not really the fault of the interviewers. There are just certain topics that are of general interest and the interviewer has no idea how many other times you've talked about it. Anyway, several weeks ago I got asked a question. Not a new question, but one of the staples that I'm always asked. My answer was quite lengthy, as it's a meaty topic and I've spent years fine-tuning my answer. That's when it occurred to me that the topic was worthy of a column. Plus, I have spent eleven years refining my answer, so I knew I had my ducks in order as what to say.

Today's column is going to answer this question. I am going to answer the question in depth and hopefully shed some light on areas of the game that you might not have thought about. Today, you all get to be my interviewer. And all you have to do is ask one simple but rather complex question. Ready? Let's go.

So Mark, why is Magic such a great game?

I'm glad you asked. As someone who's worked on design for a decade, I've actually given the topic a great deal of thought. The answer is a large number of things, but I'm going to narrow my answer to the ten things that I think are the most important. The answers aren't in any order of importance as there really isn't one. Different players are drawn to different facets, although I believe all players can relate to each of the ten reasons. Note that I've touched upon pieces of this answer in previous columns, but I've never grouped them all in one place before.

#1, #2 & #3 – The Golden Trifecta

Let's start in a cheaty fashion by giving one answer that's also three. It is my belief that **Magic: the Gathering** is the compilation of three genius ideas by Richard Garfield. These three ideas are: the concept of the trading card game, the color wheel, and the mana system. Let's take a look at each of these individually.

The Concept of the Trading Card Game

I've always been a voracious reader of non-fiction. I love soaking up facts about all sorts of things. One topic that I've spent some time reading about is inventions. There are many types of inventions, but the Holy Grail is what I will call a "paperclip invention". A paperclip invention is something so obvious, so straightforward, so simple and elegant that the second everyone sees it, they cannot understand how no one thought of it before. There's no doubt that a paperclip invention will succeed. Its genius is immediate at its outset. Trading card games are, to me at least, a paperclip invention.

I remember when I first heard about **Magic**. Someone explained to me that someone had combined trading cards with a card game. The first words out of my mouth were, "That's brilliant. How had no one thought of that before now?"

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It is my belief that human beings are collectors by nature (see my [“Collecting My Thoughts”](#) column for more on this). Gamers, in particular, have the added quality of being competitive (not necessarily in a “go to tournaments” way, but definitely in a “I’ll do what I do better than anyone else” kind of way). Collectable cards meeting modular design is like chocolate accidentally spilling into peanut butter. You know something good’s going to result. The genius of trading cards is big enough that I’ll be hitting on different facets of it as I explain other aspects of **Magic’s** success.

The Color Wheel

If the concept of the trading card games is the brains, the color wheel is the heart. When you deconstruct **Magic** down to its skeleton, you realize that everything is built around the color wheel. (Yeah, yeah in the matter of two sentences I compared the color wheel to two different body parts. I do things like that.) Both mechanics and flavor start with the color wheel. It is the one thing that binds all aspects of the game together.

I’m one of the flavor gurus (like the rules gurus but focused on the color wheel instead of the comp rules). I’ve studied the color wheel more than just about any human on the face of the Earth. And I am constantly surprised by both how elegant and how potent it is. Be aware that Richard didn’t invent any of the conflicts or themes in the colors. Rather he collected all that he could from a variety of different sources and coalesced it into a single system. That is why the ideas seem so timeless; it’s because they are. We’ve fiddled a bit with some of the execution, but the core of what the color wheel represents has never changed.

I’ve spent a not small portion of [my column examining the color wheel](#) and hopefully I’ve demonstrated the richness and the depth that can be found within it.

The Mana System

This is the Rodney Dangerfield of the Golden Trifecta. It gets no respect. For some reason most players see mana screw as an evil entity rather than as a necessary bi-product of the backbone of the game. In my mind it’s like dismissing cars because they let off exhaust. **Magic** has great pacing. It has build-up and excitement. It has surprise and drama. It has evolution. It allows cards of widely varying power to co-exist in a game where you can pick what cards you play with.

The idea of trading card games is a great one, but the methods of how to execute it are a tricky one. I’m not saying that Richard’s execution is the only viable one, but it does an excellent job of addressing a number of tricky issues. I’ve had the pleasure of building multiple new trading card games so I can say first hand that I understand the many issues of making one work. The mana system solves so many problems in a very straight-forward and yes, dare I say, elegant manner.

One For All, All For One

Each of the above three items is remarkable in isolation. The fact that Richard brought all three together humbles me as a designer like nothing else I’ve encountered in game design. People ask me why I haven’t burnt out after eleven years working on the same game. My answer is that those three items have so much depth and sophistication that I’m not done learning everything I can about them yet. (And don’t worry, I won’t be for many, many years to come.) My goal as a game designer is to come up with one item that’s in the ballpark of any one of those three ideas.

Why is **Magic** such a great game? Because at its core it’s three great ideas.



#4 – The Crispy Hash Brown Effect

I love hash browns. The best part for me is the crispy shell. After I’ve eaten through the scrumptious brown exterior, the rest is downhill. Yes, I like potatoes and I’ll eat the inside of the hash brown, but once the crispy shell is eaten, I start to lose interest.

In my opinion, games are just like a crispy hash brown. The crispy shell is the discovery process of the game. The most fun part about learning a new game is figuring the game out. But at some point you crack it; you figure out the key things that are of importance. (You know, get the middle square in Tic Tac Toe; the corners are key in Othello, etc.) And from that point, the game shifts from a strategic one to a tactical one. You begin to memorize things. The early part of the game becomes more rote. In the worst cases, you learn enough to keep from being defeated.



It’s not hard to see this process if you look back at games you’ve played. Think about games you once enjoyed that you abandoned. Why did you stop playing? Did they cease to be fun? It is my contention that most often a game becomes less fun because you’ve burnt through the discovery process. That said, some games handle this stage better than others. There are many classic games that have lasted a mighty long time, but staying with those games requires a fundamental shift in how you’re getting your fun. It takes a lot more work to reach the same highs that you had when you started. You tend to rely more on matching up your skills against those of

others. (Although to be fair, this also happens at **Magic** but at a much, much slower rate.) The game shifts from being visceral to being more cerebral.

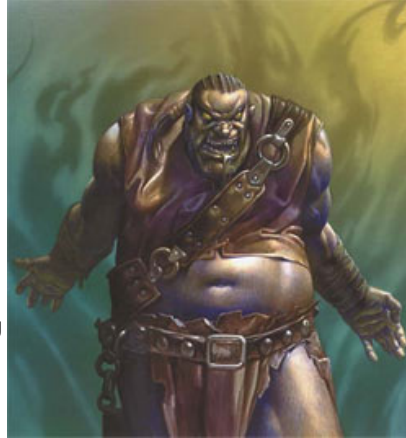
This leads us to one of **Magic's** strongest attributes. In crispy hash brown terms, it regrows its shell. Because **Magic** keeps adding new cards, it keeps shifting what matters. The discovery process that takes days or weeks or months at another game takes an eternity in **Magic**. You never truly figure the game out because it keeps changing. You don't ever have to eat the inside of the hash brown. And if you do, you know that it's just a matter of time before you get your crispy shell back.

Why is **Magic** such a great game? Because it constantly evolves, always keeping the players on their toes.

#5 – The Smorgasbord Advantage

People love buffets. Why? I believe two reasons. One, unlimited food at a limited price. (**Magic's** nowhere close to this one.) Two, it is filled with infinite possibilities. If the buffet is large enough with enough options, every eater knows that they will be made happy. What makes each person happy will differ greatly. What matters is that the eater knows that he will have the tools he needs to have his own perfect meal.

Magic is the Smorgasbord of games. The modular nature of trading card games means that each player has a nearly infinite number of options. (For example, R&D figured out for a potential **Magic Online** ad that the Online Standard format at the time had more legal 60-card decks than there were atoms in the universe.) In short, **Magic** allows each player to design what kind of game experience he or she is going to have. You like aggressive beatdown? It can be yours. You want to focus on cards revolving around the film *Reservoir Dogs*? Can do. Multi-player? Solitaire? Highly competitive? Goofy? Fast? Slow? Complicated? Simple? **Magic** can be any and all those things.



This is important for several reasons. First, it guarantees that everyone can find the game experience they are looking for. Second, it keeps the game fresh because it allows players to shift the game when they grow tired of it. Third, it allows two different players with two different desires the ability to each get what they want while still playing the same game. Any one of those features would be a huge boon. All three? A smorgasbord.

Why is **Magic** such a great game? Because it's everything to everyone.

#6 – The Metagame

Let me start this reason off with a little secret. **Magic's** not really a game. It's a hobby. It's a life style. Very few people that play **Magic** just play **Magic**. When Richard first pitched the idea of a trading card game, he said that it was a game that was bigger than the box it came in. Think about this. What does it take to play Monopoly? You sit down and open the box, take out the pieces and start playing.

For **Magic**? You buy the cards. You have to do research to find out what cards exist. You have to read about what others are saying about the cards. Then you have to acquire the cards you want that you didn't open. Perhaps you buy them. Possibly you trade for them. Then it's time to build a deck. This usually requires some more research to learn about the environment. Next you might playtest. After you get your deck together, you might talk with others. Maybe show it around. You'll get feedback and possibly tweak your deck. All of this happens before the game.

R&D came up with the term "metagame" to describe the game around the game. (And yes, it has two meanings since the word is also used now to talk about the environment itself.) The metagame is a major component of what makes **Magic** the game it is. When you crack open your very first pack, you're not just getting fifteen pieces of cardboard. You're getting an organized play system, online resources, a library of material, and numerous communities.

Why is **Magic** such a great game? Because it's more than just a game.

#7 – The Ego Trip

Each individual human considers themselves more important than anyone else. This isn't a bad thing. It's actually perfectly normal behavior. Why? Because to each person they *are* more important than anyone else. No one else has your perspective. No one else is capable of looking out for you like you. It's no one else's job to think about your needs twenty-four hours a day. The net result of this is that people value things highly that involve themselves. Psychologically this is called ego investment.

The idea behind ego investment is that people are more connected to things that they feel are more connected to them. How does this apply to **Magic**? To answer this, let's take another look at trading card games. What sets trading card games apart from most games (although not all games) is that it requires you to put together something (a deck) before



you can play. The deck becomes very personalized as you spend a lot of solo time constructing and tweaking it.

Your ego gets very invested in your deck because you've put a lot of yourself into it. Winning doesn't just validate you. It also validates your deck. Which, through this ego investment, is part of you. This makes **Magic** much more personal than the average game. As such, it causes a much tighter bond between the player and the game.

Why is **Magic** such a great game? Because it connects with you on a level more personal than other games.

#8 – Premium Status

As I explained above, I've worked in Wizards of the Coast R&D for over ten years. While my time is currently one hundred percent **Magic**, I've spent thousands of hours over the years working on other games. You want to know the biggest shock about working on a non-**Magic** game? Not having the resources that **Magic** has. For example, I was leading the design of a new trading card game. To make the initial large set, I was given less time than a small **Magic** expansion. I was given a smaller design team than the average **Magic** design team. And I had few of the resources available to **Magic** (a dedicated rules manager, a fully-stocked creative team, external playtesters, etc.).

Why? Because the game didn't warrant what **Magic** gets. **Magic** is Wizards of the Coast's premiere game (along with **Dungeons & Dragons**). It gets the top notch of everything. On other games, we might have to make do with less. But not on **Magic**. **Magic** is our bread and butter and we treat it accordingly. **Magic** gets the time and attention in the Pit that no other game gets. The opportunity to work on **Magic** is considered a great honor.

Why is **Magic** such a great game? Because we spend the time and resources to ensure that it is so.

#9 – The Ultimate Fantasy

At Wizards of the Coast, we talk about core gaming. That is, gaming by people who consider gaming a hobby. In the core, there are three major game genres – trading cards, role playing and miniatures. There's an argument that multi-player online games is a fourth category. Fine, let's throw it in. The leader in each of those four categories has a fantasy setting. Coincidence? I don't think so.

I believe that fantasy taps into a core ethos that speaks to gamers. I believe that the fact that **Magic** is about magic is very fundamental to the game's success. It gives it a mystical quality that helps it transcend the cards. In addition, I think the flavor taps into some key emotions. (This is also a reason I believe that the color wheel is so well received.)

Why is **Magic** such a great game? Because it has a quality to it that speaks to players on a subconscious emotional level.

#10 – Not So Ancient History

Finally, is a quality that **Magic** didn't always have: history. The game is thirteen years old. And that's something for a game that reinvents itself three or four times a year. When a player starts playing, he walks into a world that has thirteen years of material. Thirteen years of data. Thirteen years of wisdom. New players not only have the ability to explore forwards, they can explore backwards as well.

And this gives the game perspective. While the game will keep bending in new directions, history gives the players (and the designers as well) a foothold into the future.

Why is **Magic** such a great game? Because it has the history to teach it how.



Why Is Magic Such A Great Game?

In the end, the truest answer is not any one of the above answers, but rather the combination of them all. Each piece is a crucial piece of the big puzzle.

Let me end by saying that it is my honor to work on **Magic**. I've been a game player since I could roll my first die. I own hundreds of games and have had the opportunity to play many more. To me, **Magic** is hands down the best game ever made. The fact that I get to spend my days knee deep in it trying to live up to Richard's vision is a dream come true. There's not a job I want to be doing more.

This means there's a high percentage that I'll still be here next week. So join me when I have angels in my eyes.

Until then, may you have a job you love as much.



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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