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State of Design - 2006

Mark Rosewater
Making Magic
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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Last year I began a tradition that I plan to continue as long as I'm Head Designer. I am referring to the annual State of Design column. Modeled after the American President's State of the Union address, this column is meant to give you an idea of where I, the guy in charge of **Magic** design, feel the game is headed. In addition, at the end of this article I have an announcement so awesome that it will literally rock some of your worlds. It hits upon an issue that has generated more letters to me than any other topic. But that's for a little later. Let's focus on the topic at hand. **Magic** design, how are things going?

The short and simple answer is really well, but when was my column ever about the short and simple answer? Let's begin by looking at the three goals I set out for **Magic** last year (in 2005's State of the Design column):

#1 – Institute Block Design

I feel like I hit this goal as square on the head as a metaphorical nail can be hit. *Ravnica* Block was clearly designed as a single entity. The block was carefully mapped out and I feel like it worked out exactly as we planned. Most importantly, the public seemed to embrace the idea of a block model with great excitement. *Ravnica* was definitely one of the best received blocks we've ever done. I feel the structure of the block model was a key element of its success.



The important thing to remember though was that *Ravnica*'s design was merely one way to design a block. It's far from the only way. As *Time Spiral* Block will show, there are definitely other ways to design a block. Hopefully, you'll like them as much.

#2 – Design Between Blocks

It's hard to judge this goal until the *Time Spiral* block is out, but I feel we had some success forming synergies between the *Kamigawa* and *Ravnica* blocks. Remember, my goal with this task is to change how we do design to help ensure that each Standard environment is a blending of the two adjacent blocks rather than a battle between them. I have confidence that *Ravnica/Time Spiral* Standard is going to have decks that evolve out a combination of the two blocks, yet until it actually happens, this task is still on probation.

#3 – Design and Creative Integration

This was another home run in my book. *Ravnica* was everything I hoped for in the integration of mechanics and flavor. While *Time Spiral* block also has good integration, it functions in a very different manner than *Ravnica* block. What I mean by this is that all the pieces of the card come together for a singular effect, just not the same kind of effect that *Ravnica* block created. I'm quite curious to see what you all think of it.

When we tally up the totals, we get two successes and one optimistic "wait and see." A mighty fine year. That said, I feel that my position is to keep advancing the state of design. Yes, things are good. Could they be better? What other improvements can be made? As with last year, I chose to pick three goals for the coming year. Let's take a look:

Goal #1 – Continue with the Goals of Last Year

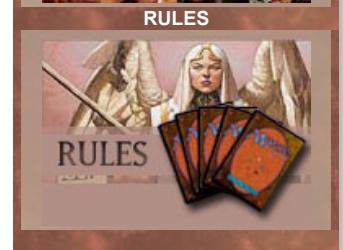
Just because we had success with *Ravnica* block doesn't mean that the goals are done. Here's where I feel each of them stand.

Institute Block Design – We proved that the idea of block design was worthy, but all we've done so far is succeed in one incarnation of it. **Magic** is an ever-changing game. It requires that its design continually reinvent itself and innovate. This means that in order for block design to flourish, we have to prove that there are multiple different types of block designs that work. *Time Spiral* Block will be block design model #2. Peanut will be block design model #3. And so on, and so on. (Which isn't to imply that we won't revisit block models.) I have great faith in the design space of block design. The next step is proving that the diversity exists.

Design Between Blocks – This is an ongoing goal with has two distinct parts. First, I am trying to find new ways to flavor and theme blocks that allow some subtlety in deck design. The "play a lot of X" model (where X was the

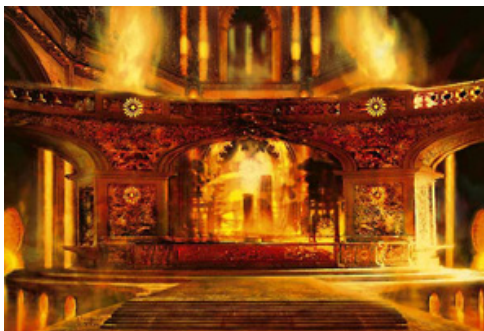
Final Wrap-up

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aspect being focused on, be it multicolored, tribal, artifacts, etc.) made sense as we were finding our feet with the idea of themes, but as design has matured, I think we need to find more layered themes that create environments that are more open to creative deckbuilding.

Second, we need to be careful when picking our themes such that we can juxtapose them to allow interesting synergies between blocks rather than just within them. Once *Time Spiral* is out, I hope you will see that the *Ravnica* and *Time Spiral* blocks were very aware of what the other one was up to, and not in a super-obvious-slap-the-players-across-the-face kind of way.



Finally, let me stress that this goal is not only making us conscious of what precedes and follows a particular block, it is also changing how we look at themes. The “block monster” problem that I talked about last year stemmed from the fact that we made our themes narrow enough that it forced players down the same paths. With current design, we are trying to open the themes up such that they create a number of different paths rather than a singular best strategy. Another way to think of this is that we’re trying to craft our themes to have a little less of a “R&D built our decks for us” feel while at the same time still creating cohesive enough themes that they help flavor and structure the block. Not an easy task, but one I feel my design team is up to.

Design and Creative Integration – I’ll be honest that *Time Spiral* was more of a challenge for this goal than *Ravnica*. This is mostly because the pieces came together in a very different fashion than any set we’ve ever done before. I’m happy with the end result, but the work to get there created one of the creative team’s toughest years ever. That said, I’m quite excited for you to see what they’ve done on *Time Spiral*. It’s quite different than other years, but pretty cool nonetheless.

In short, this goal is all about keeping up the high standards set during the last year. I am very proud of *Ravnica*. It’s important to me that it’s not seen as an exception, but rather as a ramp up to a new level of design/creative integration.

Goal #2 – Embrace the Tools of the Past

One of the great challenges of designing **Magic** is its insatiable appetite for innovation. **Magic** is a game that keeps evolving. This means that the design team is constantly kept on their toes, as the tricks that worked last year can’t be relied upon for next year. It’s quite scary when you stop and think about it. So what’s a **Magic** designer to do? The answer is to think inside the box.

When most people think of design resources, their attention goes to the unknown. They imagine the great veins of untapped design potential. But what the majority of people gloss over is the most important resource of all – the past. **Magic** has had top designers innovating for thirteen years. Along the way, we’ve come up with quite a number of awesome ideas. And you know what? We still have those ideas - and they’re still awesome.

Once we’ve created a mechanic or a card or a theme or even a block model, we’ve made a resource. One that can be used again later in **Magic’s** life. But when you stop and think how much we’ve made use of that resource, it’s pretty pitiful. Care to guess how many keyword mechanics we’ve brought back in a later set (not counting sets later in the same block, and not counting mechanics that went on to just become game staples such as equipment)? Two – cumulative upkeep and cycling. We’ve also brought back “pitch” cards numerous times and slivers once. We’ve expanded single cards, such as *Kindle* and *Lobotomy*, into mechanics. We’ve repeated a few cycles. But all in all, we’ve not made great use of the resources of days gone by.

This goal is to try and change that, starting, of course, with *Time Spiral* block. I think you’ll like what we’ve done.



Goal #3 – Find Ways To Surprise

One of the joys of **Magic** design is finding new ideas that break conventions of old. And note that I don’t mean breaking them for the sake of breaking them. What I’m talking about is finding design space that, on purpose and for a good reason, explores areas that were previously considered off limits. This is dangerous territory as forbidden areas are usually forbidden for a reason, but **Magic** design demands an explorer mentality. You have to be willing to venture into areas that have little dragons written on the edge of the map.

Be aware that the area I’m talking about covers a wide spectrum. Sometimes the surprising thing is not big and splashy. Sometimes it’s a little choice made on a single card that flies against conventional wisdom. Sometimes it is reevaluating old data with a new eye. Sometimes it’s taking a “what if” idea on the road for a test drive. The point is that we cannot surprise you if we’re unwilling to shock ourselves.

This might be the area of *Time Spiral* block that I’m proudest of. It’s not that we’re revolutionizing the game, but rather we’re taking calculated risks in areas where it makes sense to take some risk. As I’ve said in this column before, risk taking won’t kill **Magic**, not taking risks will. That said, I am not one to do something different solely for

the sake of it being different. Each decision made during this upcoming block stemmed from the design team coming to a crossroads and taking a peek down the road less traveled. (A map, a test drive, Robert Frost poetry – this section is metaphor-o-rific.)

I've never been more excited to see the reaction to a set than I am for the *Time Spiral* block. This block definitely did not play it safe. How do you follow up one of the most popular blocks of all time? By doing something different. By not just resting on our laurels. By taking interesting risks. I guarantee you before this block is over you'll have the experience to open a pack and be a little shocked by a card we made. And maybe even more than a little shocked.

I want my reign as Head Designer to be remembered as a time that was exciting because I kept all of you on edge. I kept you guessing and maybe threw a few curveballs your way. If nothing else, perhaps I spurned some interesting debates about what we may and may not actually do. (And yes, for those that have asked on the boards, I am lurking and I am enjoying myself.)

“I Love It When A Plan Comes Together”

In publishing, there is something known as a sophomore slump. The idea behind the superstition is that to break out, a writer has to capture lightning in a bottle. How do you do that a second time? The answer is the same way you did it the first time yet slightly differently. Don't get scared of your successes, embrace them. *Ravnica* was my first block as Head Designer and it went about as well as I could have hoped. The next step is to take everything I learned from that block and apply it to what follows. The key is to remember not the choices made in the first success, but the motivations that led to those choices.

Time Spiral block is not *Ravnica* block. It never was meant to be. I don't think we can do *Ravnica* block better than we did *Ravnica* block. But I have faith in how we can make a *Time Spiral* block. Trust me, it's going to be a fun ride - I strongly urge you check it out.

Well, that's all I got for this year's peek into design. Hopefully it gave you a little insight into how we're making what we're making. But please don't leave yet. Down below is some mighty exciting news.

Join me next week when I explore why one end deserves another.

Until then, may you take a moment to see the forest for the trees.

Mark Rosewater

Now that I have my column out of the way, it's time to get to the good stuff. But I don't want to rush it because it's so, so good. As such, I'm going to start from the beginning. Once a week, Randy Buehler (my boss) and I get together to talk about how things are going. This is the time where I'm supposed to point out things I need to do my job. One of my frequent requests is that I need more designers.

During the last few years, many of R&D's designers have moved on to other projects outside the walls of Wizards. This exodus has not been met by an influx of an equal rate. Why? Because it's very hard for us to find new designers. We have good systems in place for finding developers, but our system for finding designers seems to be hire people for something else and hope some tiny percentage of them happen to turn out to be good for design.

So Randy says he agrees. We do need more designers. "How do we find them?" he asks. And that's when I pitch my crazy idea. What if we looked for them on magicthegathering.com? Then I pitched the even crazier part. What if this search for a new designer was turned into material for the website? You see, as a man with three young children I don't get out of the house much. This means that I watch a lot of television. And in today's entertainment climate, that means I watch a number of reality shows.

One genre of reality shows is the job hire. (*The Apprentice*, *Project Runway*, *America's Next Top Model*, *Top Chef*, *Who Wants To Be A Superhero?* etc.) On these shows, a series of contestants vie for a certain position. Each week they are given a real world challenge and then at the end of each show, the head guy or panel in charge boots the weakest contestant. What if we combined our job search with reality programming? This is the point where Randy said, "This sounds interesting."

"But only," I said, "If we have a prize worthy of making people jump through all these hoops."

Randy then smiled and said, "Would a six month paid design internship be good enough?"

You heard me right. The winner of "The Great Designer Search" (that's what we're calling it) wins a SIX MONTH PAID DESIGN INTERNSHIP IN WIZARDS OF THE COAST R&D!

Has that perhaps gotten your attention? As I said earlier, the number one topic of my mail is "How can I work for R&D?" Up until now, I didn't have a good answer. Now I do. Here's how it's going to work. At midnight this Thursday night/Friday morning EST (August 25), we're going to put up the first stage of this "job interview." Players will have until Monday night to complete it. From those that complete the first task, we will select a group to complete a second task. We will continue with different tasks until we have narrowed down the field to a small enough number to start the show.

Here's the point where I upset some of you. There are a few qualifications that are necessary in order to enter:

1. You must be 18 years or older.
2. You must be eligible to work in the United States and be fluent in English.
3. You must be able to relocate to Seattle for six months starting January 2007.

As long as you meet those criteria (and, oh yes, agree to the legal terms drawn up by our lawyers and included with the first round), you're good to go.

The weeding process will take several months. We plan to begin sometime in October. I, of course, am playing the Donald Trump role with a number of other R&D folk filling in as my trusted associates. I think it's going to be both fun and, hopefully, fruitful.

Sound good?

I look forward to seeing how many people apply this Friday. Good luck!

*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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