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American Pie

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 Making Magic
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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

My email surrounding *Time Spiral* has been overwhelmingly positive, but there are a few recurring complaints that keep coming to my inbox. Today, I'm going to talk about the biggest complaint. Here's a letter that I feel sums up the thoughts on this issue:

Dear Mark Rosewater,

I can't tell you my surprise to find the Timeshifted cards, but I can tell you how sad it makes me to see *Psionic Blast* get printed. You are the one who wrote "[True Blue](#)," "[Creative Differences](#)," and "[Hedonism with Attitude](#)"... these titles by which my friends and I have loved this entire game, and their subject knew we made Magic the indestructible icon it seemed sure to become. Then I saw the spoiler list. Atrocity after atrocity.

What was it that pulsed through R&D? Spike's whining? Screw with the wheel! Balance be damned! But by all that you place in Magic, Mr. Rosewater, don't touch the pie. It was baked perfect. And here you just told everyone that the pursuit of knowledge includes blasting people at the expense of head trauma! People took your word on pie as gospel. Now what the hell have you done? I thought you of all people, who'd ever stood up before the audience, would never let this happen. But you did. That... has severely damaged my faith in the Head Designer of Magic. I was certain you were made for that position for as long as you lived; now there is no trace of that trust. Make it right, Mr. Rosewater. Save the pie, save the greatest game in the world.

~Once was and maybe again, a fan,

--Jason

I've received numerous letters like this. And this one isn't one of the truly angry ones. For years now I've been stressing how important the color pie is, how it's one of the key foundations of the game. I've spent article upon article describing each color and each color combination in great detail. I even wrote an article solely about how important the color pie is ("[The Value of Pie](#)"). R&D has obviously spent years fixing it. So what happened? Why did I forsake the color pie? Et tu, Maro?

That's my topic today. (Yeah, I don't exactly seem to shy away from the controversial topics.) Hopefully, before I'm done, I'll have given you some insight into our thought process. You might not agree with it, but I do think you'll have a better understanding of why we thought it was the right decision.

One Rule to Rule Them All

I constantly talk about all the rules of **Magic** design. There are a lot. Some are more steadfast than others. Some change at the whim of new sets. Some have weathered the storm since Alpha. Above all the small menial rules, though, sit a few large rules. I shall call them the mega-rules. These mega-rules carry a lot of weight. These are the rules that all the other rules have to get out of the way of. You see, in the world of rules, there is a hierarchy. Every rule has its place with certain rules above it and certain rules below it. Why this need for a specific order? Because rules are orderly and have a need to make sure that solutions can be found for any problem. The

most problematic of problems? When two rules contradict.



It happens. Good rules tend to be absolute, and it's pretty hard for any set of rules to truly stay away from one another's turf. Contradictions are going to happen. This is why hierarchy is so important. If rules are ordered, then they know who bows to who. When two rules contradict, one rule gets to trump the other. What does this have to do with the color pie? Everything. (You can see from my writing style how I have a holistic view of life and design.) "Obey the color pie" is one of the mega-rules. Almost every rule in **Magic** design bows down before it. Note I said "almost."

What rule is bigger than "Obey the color pie?" The biggest rule of all. It is the fundamental rule that makes **Magic Magic**. What is this rule you ask? It is this: "Any rule may be broken if it is done for the right reason." For the rest of the column, I will

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refer to this as the Breaker Rule.

The king of the rules is a rule that says rules don't have to be followed? Not the best of kings, now is it? For starters, the rule doesn't say that rules don't have to be followed. It says that rules can be broken – and this part is key – “if it's done for the right reason.” What's the right reason? Now we get to the meat of today's topic.

Before we get to that, let's explore the Breaker Rule. I think most players understand that the nature of a trading card game is that it constantly evolves. Thus, it has to, by nature, break its own rules. But, aren't there rules so important that they trump the Breaker Rule? Not if evolution and discovery are key to what the game is all about. (And yes, evolution and discovery are what **Magic** is, at its core, about.) Each rule that sits above the Breaker Rule just makes the game that much less able to evolve. The further down it sits, the more and more meaningless it becomes. In fact, for the Breaker Rule to truly mean anything it has to be the king rule. The game that breaks the rules has to actually have the freedom to break the rules. Only then can the true sense of wonder remain. If any rule is up for debate, only then can the game go anywhere.

Mmm, Pie

Okay, so **Magic's** rules allow it the freedom to break its own rules. That doesn't explain why the color pie had to be broken now, in this set. What is the “right reason” that justifies it? Let me start by breaking some news to you. We break the color pie rule all the time. Not in as big a fashion as *Time Spiral*, but I want you to be aware that the color pie is more flexible than many of you might think.

How does the color pie get broken? Here's the most common way. We pick a theme. Let's take the graveyard as an example. We build a block around it (this was the *Odyssey* block for those readers that might not have been playing five years ago). In what I call the core of the color pie (yes, the color pie has different sections – I swear I'll get to it in a column one of these days), that is the center part of the pie that reflects the day-to-day color definitions, black and green are the two colors that mess with the graveyard. White does it a little. But it's the graveyard block. What fun would it be if we didn't let all five colors play around with the block theme? So we stretch things a little bit to find places that feel natural where we can let each of the colors make use of the graveyard.

Another good example of this phenomenon occurs in cycles. We make a cycle of five cards. Usually the chosen mechanic has more synergy with certain colors than the others. Dragons are a good example. Green just isn't the color of big fliers. But if we make a dragon cycle, it feels wrong to leave green hanging out to dry. So we stretch the color pie a bit and let green have a big flier.

The point I'm making here is that the color pie is stretched in every set to accommodate the larger set theme. That said, most sets make subtle stretches to the color pie. *Time Spiral* treats it like Silly Putty. Why was that necessary?



A color pie stretcher? You bet.

Attack of the Warm Fuzzies

I explained in my article on *Time Spiral* design (“[Blast from the Past](#)”) how we ended up with a nostalgia theme. As the team messed around with nostalgia, it became apparent that we were playing with something very potent. Nostalgia's power comes from the fact that it attaches itself to years and years worth of emotional connection. When you see a card that harkens back to something you had strong feelings for in the past, all those feelings return here in the present. Let me restate that one of my goals for the *Time Spiral* block was to move in a very different direction from *Ravnica*. The guild system was very structured and cerebral. I wanted the new block to be more freeform and more visceral. Less thinking, more feeling. When we stumbled upon nostalgia I knew we had found exactly what we needed.

There was one small problem. In order for nostalgia to work, we had to tap into things that were actually nostalgic. The thing we did ten years ago that we also did yesterday doesn't cut it. We weren't going to invoke yesteryear with **Grizzly Bears** and **Stone Rain**. To make nostalgia work, we had to actually dig into things that we haven't done for a while. Couldn't we have done that but still stayed within the modern color pie? The blunt answer is no.

Magic has changed too much. The number of things printed in Alpha that could just be printed as is today is pretty small. This isn't just the color pie. The rules have changed, templates have changed, how we handle mechanics has changed. **Magic** now is a different animal from how **Magic** was then. This isn't a bad thing, but it does make harnessing nostalgia quite difficult.

In the end, it came down to the following decision. Were we willing to embrace nostalgia as a theme if we knew that we'd have to temporarily disrupt the flow of modern **Magic**? Obviously, we chose yes. Having said that, I know there are those out there that think we made the wrong choice. My only answer to that is that the feedback we've been getting stresses that a great majority of players are happy with what we chose. By any metric you can name (sales, tournament sanctioning, prerelease turnout, general hype, letters in my inbox, etc.), *Time Spiral* is blowing away all expectations. As the Head Designer, I cannot fathom how making *this* many people *this* happy is a wrong choice for the game.

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“I Love It When A Plan Comes Together”

The good news for those concerned is that we didn't do the pie bleeding willy-nilly. We actually put a lot of thought into it. The color bleeding didn't happen by accident. We were quite conscious of what we were doing because we were trying to evoke a very specific response.

When thinking about what *Time Spiral* does to modern **Magic**, we broke the set up into two parts: the new cards and the “timeshifted” cards. Why? Because over the years we've learned that **Magic** players think about the game in one of two ways. They are what I'll call either conglomerate players or duration players. Conglomerate players see **Magic** as a singular, ever-growing game. New cards come in, but nothing ever leaves, because once they exist they are and will always be part of the game. The best example of this type of player is the Vintage and Legacy crowds. The duration crowd align themselves with one or more formats that dynamically change with cards going in and out. The Standard and Extended players fit in this group. The conglomerate game is much more stable because things change at a slower pace.

We separated these two types of players because the timeshifted cards mean radically different things to them. To the conglomerate player, they change nothing. **Psionic Blast** already exists. Being timeshifted has no real impact other than the fact there's now a premium version. The duration crowd, on the other hand, cares a great deal, because timeshifting the cards brings them back into the environment. But not forever. Duration play will eventually rotate the cards back out. This is an important safety valve for R&D. Mistakes made in duration play are temporary. Mistakes made in conglomerate play are not. (Okay, we do have some ability to make new cards to realign conglomerate formats, but it's tough.)



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This is why we took the biggest risks with the timeshifted cards. We knew we'd be shaking up the duration formats, but for a limited time. (And shaking up duration play is what makes duration play what it is – an ever-evolving game state.) The timeshifted cards by their nature could not mess up conglomerate play. While the non-timeshifted cards also mess around with color pie of days gone by, you'll notice that we were much more careful not to push these cards. The most powerful non-timeshifted cards are the ones that hint at the past in a way that isn't inconsistent with the modern color pie. The maguses are a great example. We took iconic artifacts and then aligned them with the

current color pie. That way we could push these cards without changing the fundamentals of conglomerate play. The new non-timeshifted cards that embraced an old color pie were developed to not be “Tier 1” (our way of saying cards that are pushed for tournament play). By doing this we felt that we could create the effect we wanted without fundamentally changing conglomerate **Magic** – yet still taking duration **Magic** on a little joy ride.

The Element of Surprise

All of this leads to the biggest question of all. How much surprise should **Magic** have? How much discovery does the game need to thrive? How important is it to do things that the players don't anticipate? My answers: A lot. A lot. A lot.

I believe it is my job as the Head Designer to take all of you on a thrill ride. Every year. I want to take you to places you'd never guess we go. I want you to explore the game from vantage points you never bothered to imagine. To me, **Magic** is the game it is because of the metamorphosis it goes through. To do that, I have to have the freedom to break rules. Even the important rules. And trust me, the Color Pie Rule is one of the most important. Just because *Time Spiral* block is having some fun with it does not mean that we aren't back to status quo come Peanut (the code name for 2007's large expansion).

All my articles aren't in vain. I believe heartily in the importance of the color pie. Please note that the *Time Spiral* block isn't stretching the color pie for no reason. The choices being made are catered to match what we want to do with this block. They were carefully thought out, enough so that I feel they qualify as “the right reason.”

The final thing to take away from today's article is that no rule is truly safe. There is nothing off limits. We will continue breaking the rules. Just understand that we do so with loving care. We do so *because* we love this game and want it to reach to the heights that we know it's capable of. Our decisions are not out of disregard for what makes the game tick, but rather out of great respect for those things. I'm more than happy to have people say I take risks that they would choose not to take, but please don't ever charge me with doing so out of lack of caring about the game. This game has done more positive things to my life than just about anything in existence. I'm not about to do it wrong.

***We will continue
breaking the rules. Just
understand that we do so
with loving care.***

And that, my dear readers, is why *Time Spiral* does the things it does.

Join me next week when we're off to see the wizard.

Until then, may you learn to let your loved ones change.

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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