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Design 103

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Making Magic

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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

There has never been a better time to pay attention at magicthegathering.com if you want to learn about **Magic** design. Why? Three words – [The Great Designer Search](#) (okay, that's four, but who really counts "the"?). Fifteen people are vying for the chance to win a paid **Magic** design internship. Each week they are given a design challenge that is critiqued by four judges (Aaron Forsythe, Devin Low, myself, and Gleemax – the alien brain in a jar that runs R&D). The design challenges are hard, and the critiques are brutally honest. The challenge officially ends when I (I'm the Donald Trump of this reality show) eliminate one or more contestants. The show has just started ramping up and no one has been cut yet, so it's a great time to jump in and watch.



What this means for all of you is that there are more words dedicated to card design than have ever appeared on the web site before. So much so that it has inspired me to write part three of my ongoing series about design basics (following [Design 101](#) and [Design 102](#)). Today I'll be talking about variations of one key mistake made by new designers. My examples will be from the most recent *Great Designer Search* submissions. Note that this week asked the players to make five-card cycles (one in each rarity).

A quick aside. Over one thousand people applied for *The Great Designer Search*. The fifteen candidates that made the finals were the best of the best. Still, these are amateur designers and we're throwing very hard tasks at them. To make matters worse, we only give them seventy-two hours to complete the task. My using them as examples is not meant to demean them in any way. These are people with good raw design talent. The fact that even *they* make these basic mistakes is an important lesson in how hard these mistakes are to avoid.

'Til Daddy Takes The T-Bird Away

So what's the biggest mistake I'm seeing in *The Great Designer Search*? It's one I see often with novice designers. Here's a tip. Just because the game is capable of doing something isn't enough. Just because something is interesting in a distant theoretical sense isn't enough. Just because you can imagine the situation where said card would create an interesting situation isn't enough.

Magic is a game. People play **Magic** for the reason they play any game. It's fun. It's entertaining to play. It makes them smile. At the core, **Magic** succeeds because it makes people happy. The game in conglomerate and the cards in isolation are fun. Sometimes designers get so caught up in what they're doing that they forget this basic point. Today's column is going to examine a number of different ways designers can keep the game from being fun.

Mistake #1 – Making The Audience Do Something They Don't Want To Do

As the saying goes, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." In game design, think of the horse as the player and drinking as having fun. You, the designer, can make the player do anything you want, but you can't make them enjoy it. A good designer makes the game fun because he lets the players essentially do what they want to do.

This doesn't mean you have to let them do whatever they want, but it does mean that you have to walk them down paths that they want to walk down. Sometimes you can even lead them through something they won't like if it's on the way to something they really will. Too many designers try to force the players to enjoy something they don't want to. You're never going to win this fight, because when the player gets frustrated enough, they quit playing your game. My example for this point comes from Mark Globus. This was submitted as his common cycle:

```
Uncontainable Lightning (common)
R
Sorcery
Uncontainable Lightning deals 3 damage
to target creature or player.
Revenge R (Opponents may play this card
from your graveyard for its Revenge
cost. Then remove it from the game.)
```



Uncontainable Delays (common)

1U

Sorcery

Put target creature on top of its owner's library.

Revenge 1U (Opponents may play this card from your graveyard for its Revenge cost. Then remove it from the game.)

Uncontainable Health (common)

W

Sorcery

You gain 5 life.

Revenge W (Opponents may play this card from your graveyard for its Revenge cost. Then remove it from the game.)

Uncontainable Migraines (common)

1B

Sorcery

Target player discards two cards.

Revenge B (Opponents may play this card from your graveyard for its Revenge cost. Then remove it from the game.)

Uncontainable Growth (common)

G

Sorcery

Search your library for a basic land card and put that card into play tapped. Then shuffle your library.

Revenge G (Opponents may play this card from your graveyard for its Revenge cost. Then remove it from the game.)

This cycle allows the player to get cheaper spells at the cost of a drawback. What's wrong with this cycle? The drawback – allowing your opponent to play your spells. Why? Because players don't want to do this. Who wants to let their opponent play their spells? Being on the receiving end of a **Mindslicer** or a **Bribery** is not too much fun, but then your opponent constantly does things to you that you don't like. As a player you understand that in order for you to do things to your opponent that you enjoy, he or she is going to do them to you. The problem with this cycle is that it asks the player to bring this unhappy situation on themselves.

Making players do things they don't want to do creates unfun moments. This isn't homework. This isn't a job. This is a game that people choose to play because they enjoy it. If it stops being fun, they're going to stop playing, and that's about as bad a response as you can get as a designer. This cycle fails because players don't want to do what it's asking them to do. Yes, you can bribe them with cheap spells, but in the end, you're still making them do something they don't want to do.

So does that mean that a designer should never design drawbacks? Of course not. Drawbacks can be fun, but the player has to be able to see ways they can navigate around the drawback. They have to imagine ways to design a deck that can handle the drawback. They have to see the drawback as something they are willing to do. Forcing players to do something they don't want to do will almost always result in an unpleasant game experience. Don't do it. (And yes, there are exceptions to this, but I would stress to a young designer to learn the craft, then break the rules.)

Mistake #2 – Making The Audience Do Unnecessary Work

Imagine that you're at work one day and your boss comes up to you and says, "You, grab a shovel."

He then makes you go outside and start digging a hole. As soon as that hole is a few feet deep, he moves you to a new location and has you dig a new hole. He keeps doing this until you've spent a couple hours digging several dozen holes. Finally, you say to him, "Boss, why am I digging these holes?"

The boss then pulls out a small tree. He looks at all your holes and then puts it into the one nearest him. When you ask how many trees he is planting, he says "Just one."

"So why did I dig so many holes?" you ask.

"To give us more options," is his reply.

How do you feel in that moment? Pretty angry. Why? Because he wasted your time. He really only needed one hole. He made you do a lot of work that in the end was for nothing. People pretty much don't like that. The same holds true for game design. Sure you can make your players do whatever you tell them. But come the game's end, the players will be able to tell when you've wasted their time, and trust me, they won't be happy about it.

The example of this comes from Christopher Jablonski. This is the common cycle he submitted:

Taboo Elves (common)

1G

Creature - Elf Shaman

2/2

Corrupt 1, T: Add G to your mana pool. (Put a corruption counter on an



uncorrupt card in play you control as an additional cost to play this ability.)

Student of the Occult (common)

2U

Creature - Bird Wizard

2/2

Flying; Defender

Corrupt 1, T: Look at the top three cards of your library, then put them back in any order. (Put a corruption counter on an uncorrupt card in play you control as an additional cost to play this ability.)

Bankrupt Preacher (common)

3B

Creature - Human Cleric

2/2

Fear

Whenever Bankrupt Preacher deals combat damage to a player, that player puts a corruption counter on an uncorrupt card in play he or she controls.

Remorseful Swordsman (common)

1W

Creature - Human Knight

2/2

First Strike

Whenever Remorseful Swordsman deals combat damage to a player, put a corruption counter on an uncorrupt card in play you control.

Darkfire Channeler (common)

2R

Creature - Dwarf Wizard

2/2

R, Corrupt 1, T: Darkfire Channeler deals one damage to target creature or player. (Pay R and put a corruption counter on an uncorrupt card in play you control as an additional cost to play this ability.)

Let me start by saying that there is actually something interesting buried in this cycle. The idea of cards that need untainted material to work is flavorful and hints at a mechanical area that hasn't been too deeply explored. But (there's always a but), it creates a lot of busy work. As an example, let's examine how this cycle would affect Sealed. Because the cards are common, you would often see them in Limited, but because there are only five, you will often get exactly one.

What does one of these cards do? It starts spreading counters over every card you own. While you occasionally might run out of permanents, most of the time, if you just have one card with this mechanic, you will add cards fast enough that the game will end before you deplete your supply. This means that you will often be doing busy work adding counters to every permanent you own for no payoff. Not a recipe for fun.

The lesson here is that you have to be very careful each and every time you ask something of your players. Make sure that there is a high correlation between how much work you ask of them and how much they get out of it. When the ratio gets too high, you have to reexamine why you're using that mechanic.

Mistake #3 – Don't Put Things They Care About Out of Their Control

Game players put a lot of trust in the hands of the designer. (Much in the same way that they put trust in a director when they sit themselves down in front of a movie screen.) They assume that the designer knows what they are doing and follow the paths laid out for them. This is why players get so upset when a game isn't fun. It's a betrayal of trust. They put up their time and attention and the designer didn't come through with the goods.



This lesson is about a betrayal of this trust. Players are willing to go in blind to a game, or in the case of **Magic** to a new set of cards. They understand that things might not always be as they seem because good design, and especially good **Magic** design, throws curveballs at them. Things that might not seem like they would be fun often are once you get to start playing with the cards.

My metaphor for this mistake is to imagine that your friend asked you to close your eyes. He then tells you to follow his voice. At one point he walks you into a wall. It hurts. You get angry. Why? Because you trusted your friend to look out for you. When he asked you to close your eyes, you believed there was a trust that he would take steps to make sure you wouldn't hurt yourself. Even if he didn't mean to walk you into a wall, it still upsets you, because intentionally or no, he just walked you into a wall! Game design is similar to this in that we constantly ask players to metaphorically close their eyes.

My example for this mistake comes from Aaron Weiner. This was his rare cycle:

Weakness: Permanent (rare)
U
Enchantment—Aura
Enchant permanent
When ~ comes into play, draw 2 cards.
When ~ leaves play, you lose the game.
~ is indestructible.

Weakness: Enchantment (rare)
W
Enchantment—Aura
Enchant enchantment
When ~ comes into play, gain 10 life.
When ~ leaves play, you lose the game.
~ is indestructible.

Weakness: Artifact (rare)
B
Enchantment—Aura
Enchant artifact
When ~ comes into play, each opponent discards a card, then discards a card at random.
When ~ leaves play, you lose the game.
~ is indestructible.

Weakness: Creature (rare)
R
Enchantment—Aura
Enchant creature
When ~ comes into play, destroy target land.
When ~ leaves play, you lose the game.
~ is indestructible.

Weakness: Land (rare)
G
Enchantment—Aura
Enchant land
When ~ comes into play, put a 3/3 green Spirit creature token into play.
When ~ leaves play, you lose the game.
~ is indestructible.

What's wrong here? I watched multiple judges read this cycle for the first time and each said aloud the same thing: "Lose the game?"

"Lose the game" is the equivalent of dynamite in game design. Yes, used properly it can do good, but more than not it's just going to blow up in your face. Why is this implementation so bad? Because it violates the player's trust in a very fundamental way. It takes one of the things they care most about (winning the game) and puts its fate under the opponent's control. Is having a very underpriced spell worth losing the game if the opponent has the proper removal spell in hand (remember these cards force you to destroy the thing being enchanted as these enchantments are themselves indestructible)? No, no it isn't.

One of the easiest shortcuts to figuring out if the player is going to like the card is to imagine the following two things. What is their first impression of the card? How do they feel when the card in play doesn't go their way? For these cards, I believe both go badly. The first impression will be one of disbelief. I assume you'd get variations on "Why did they print this card?"

The worst part, though, is the reaction to the second part. When a player plays this card and then their opponent **Terrors** their creature and they lose, they are going to start cussing. Usually when a player's own cards make him regularly curse, there's signs that something's wrong. This is why the card Lich never took off (and yes, I know there are Lich lovers out there). Yeah, it's cool, but who wants to lose the game if their opponent plays enchantment removal?

The lesson here is that you have to think about how the player feels when they play your cards. One real negative experience will wipe out lots of positive ones.

Mistake #4 – You Force The Players Hand Too Much

This next mistake walks a subtle line. Players like being led to a certain extent, but they don't like being led too much. A while back I talked about one spectrum to look at cards ("[Come Together](#)") that had to do with how much the card forced you to play with other cards. Modular cards were very open ended and could be mixed and matched with other card easily. Linear cards forced you to play with certain other cards.

Linear cards aren't by their nature bad (Slivers, as an example, are very popular linear cards), but they do have more inherent problems than modular cards. The biggest one is this. Players like to feel in charge of their destiny. Especially in a trading card game that has a deckbuilding component, players want to have the feeling of endless

possibilities (but not too endless – one of many great challenges of card design). When linear cards get too narrow, they run this problem.

You'll notice during the first two weeks' worth of judge reviews, Aaron has used the word "parasitic" several times. This is a term used by R&D that means that an idea is too self-contained. We want players to be able to look at cards and imagine many things they can do with them. Cards that are too parasitic say, "No, just look at this tiny subset of cards." When we do this, we start getting the "You're building our decks for us" comments. And you know what? They're right. **Magic** isn't fun if the players aren't given options.

This mistake has two examples. The first comes from Landon Winkler's rare cycle:



Beyond the Gate (Rare)

2G

Astral Sorcery

Search your library for any number of astral land cards and remove them from the game. Then shuffle your library. Remove CARDNAME from the game.

Whisper - 1GG: Put target astral land card you own that's removed from the game into play. (During your upkeep you may activate one Whisper ability from a card you own that is removed from the game.)

Call of the Gatekeeper (Rare)

3WW

Astral Sorcery

Remove all astral creatures and CARDNAME from the game.

Whisper - 4WWW: Put a legendary X/X white Angel creature token with flying named The Gatekeeper into play, where X is the number of astral cards you own removed from the game. (During your upkeep you may activate one Whisper ability from a card you own that is removed from the game.)

Gatekeeper's Wisdom (Rare)

XUU

Astral Sorcery

Search your library for up to X astral cards and remove them from the game. Then shuffle your library. Remove CARDNAME from the game.

Whisper - 2UU: Put target astral instant card that's removed from the game into its owner's hand. (During your upkeep you may activate one Whisper ability from a card you own that is removed from the game.)

Gatestorm (Rare)

R

Astral Sorcery

Return CARDNAME to your hand, then remove from the game a card at random from your hand.

Whisper - 1RR: Put target astral creature card that's removed from the game into play. It gains haste. Sacrifice it at end of turn. (During your upkeep you may activate one Whisper ability from a card you own that is removed from the game.)

Voice in the Mists (Rare)

1B

Astral Sorcery

Remove CARDNAME and all astral cards in all graveyards from the game.

Whisper - 3BB: Search your deck for a card with the same name as target astral card that's removed from the game, reveal it, and put it into your hand. Then shuffle your library. (During your upkeep you may activate one Whisper ability from a card you own that is removed from the game.)

The second cycle is Andrew Emmott's rare cycle:

Light Rift (rare)

X1W

Instant - Rift

Search your hand, graveyard and library for up to X Rift cards and remove them from the game. For each card removed this way, remove target attacking creature from the game. Shuffle your library.

Wind Rift (rare)

X3U

Instant - Rift

Search your hand, graveyard and library for up to X Rift cards and remove them from the game. For each card removed this way, put target permanent on top of its owner's library. Shuffle your library.

Shadow Rift (rare)

XB

Instant - Rift

Search your hand, graveyard and library for up to X Rift cards and remove them from the game. For each card removed this way, creatures get -1/-1 until end of turn. Shuffle your library.

Plasma Rift (rare)

X1R

Instant - Rift

Search your hand, graveyard and library for up to X Rift cards and remove them from the game. For each card removed this way, add RRR to your mana pool.

Shuffle your library.

Force Rift (rare)

X2G

Instant - Rift

Search your hand, graveyard and library for up to X Rift cards and remove them from the game. For each card removed this way, search your library for a creature or land card and put it into your hand.

Shuffle your library.

The problem with Astral and Rift as mechanics is that they are too parasitic. The worst part is that the power comes from playing more of the mechanics meaning that once you commit, you're forced to filled your deck with them (note that both mechanics need to have common and uncommon support). This is one of the hardest mistakes to avoid, and I'll be blunt – R&D doesn't always avoid it. (This basic problem was one of my biggest issues with the *Champions of Kamigawa* block.)

Nonetheless, if you are designing cards, this is an important mistake to understand. Players come because they want to play the game. Designers shouldn't play it for them.

Mistake #5 – Making Cards Match The Wrong Audience

My last mistake for today is one of the most subtle and one of the most egregious. I often talk in my column about how designers have to understand their audience. I also talk often about how different cards are made for different audiences. Sometimes a designer intends a card for one audience but unknowingly designs it for a different one.



The best example I can use with **Magic** is the coin flip card. Certain players love coin flipping. (These are basically Timmies with a few Johnnies) Others despise it. (Spikes most of all.) This means that the designers have to be very careful to make coin flipping cards that will appeal to the right player. This is why we avoid making tournament relevant coin flipping cards, because if they're good enough, we force Spike to play them. He doesn't like playing them. He doesn't want his skill-testing to be trumped by factors that he has zero control over (*Krark's Thumb* excepted – but that's really Johnny's card).

It is not enough to know the audience for each card. You have to make sure to design that card for that audience. The example for this mistake comes from Mark Globus (yes, poor Mark gets two examples today). This was his uncommon cycle:

The Last of the Elves (uncommon)

2G

Enchantment

Non-token Elves are Legendary.

Elves get +1/+1 and cannot be targeted by opponents' spells or effects.

The Last of the Humans (uncommon)

2W

Enchantment

Non-token Humans are Legendary.

Humans get +1/+1 and first strike.

The Last of the Wizards (uncommon)

2U

Enchantment

Non-token Wizards are Legendary.

Wizards get +1/+1 and flying.

The Last of the Zombies (uncommon)

2B

Enchantment

Non-token Zombies are Legendary.

Zombies get +1/+1 and B:Regenerate.

The Horde of Goblins (uncommon)

2R

Enchantment

Whenever a non-token Goblin is put in the graveyard from play put two 1/1 red Goblin creature tokens into play.

So what's wrong here? As I said above, this mistake is subtler than many of the others seen today. Tribal at its heart is a Timmy theme. Before we made Spike care in *Onslaught*, Spike didn't touch tribal decks with a ten-foot pole (and yes, there are a few notable exceptions, but only a few) This cycle is a Spike treatment of what want to be Timmy cards.

Timmy is the one attracted by the lords (*Goblin King*, *Lord of the Undead*, *Elvish Champion*, etc.) So making Lord-ish enchantments that put a non-Timmy restriction creates bad tension. Timmy likes to play four cards of the ones he wants. Timmy wants to make the game as fun as possible. This means putting as many of the fun cards in his deck as possible.

The problem with this cycle is that Timmy is attracted to one part of the card and dislikes the other part. This isn't a recipe for success. I should stress that this cycle isn't horrible. There are definitely neat ideas at work, but in the end, I feel that they would create a net negative feeling. The people that most want them to be fun wouldn't find them fun.

Fun Police

The takeaway from today's column is this: Don't forget why you're designing your cards. You're making a game. Games are intended to be fun, and you can't force fun. It's easy to get so caught up in the details of your "tree" that you forget about the "forest." Don't. If a card doesn't pass the litmus of fun, nothing else matters because the audience won't play it.

If today's column was of interest (and please, should I be doing this kind of column more often? Let me know), I strongly urge you pay attention to [The Great Designer Search](#). The finalists we have are a good bunch of designers and while we are putting them through the wringer they are creating a lot of very cool cards (although some of them are more fleshed out than others).

Join me next week, when legends take the fall.

Until then, may you know the joy of bringing fun to others,

Mark Rosewater

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