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# On The Stack

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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

There are a lot of positive things I can say about [The Great Designer Search](#), but here's one I hadn't anticipated. It keeps giving me topics for my off-theme week columns. Today's topic came from the audience reaction we got when the judges gave the candidates a little piece of advice: don't mention The Stack. (And yes, normally it isn't capitalized but it just felt right for this column.) (If by the way, you don't know what The Stack is, I highly recommend you click this [link](#) to Ted Knutson's "Magic Academy" column about The Stack.)

You see, the very first week of the GDS, the judges were reviewing the applicants' original card design tests, and a number of them had cards that referenced The Stack in their text. Universally, Aaron, Devin, Gleemax and I (the judges) said that it was a big no-no. That would have been the end of it had we not gotten a reaction I honestly hadn't expected. The public came out of the woodwork asking why. Not a quiet little "Oh, by the way we were wondering," but more of a "What kind of an idiotic rule is that?"

The Stack is one of the most important parts of the game. I even said that if I could go back through time and suggest one thing for Richard Garfield to change about **Magic** it would be the addition of The Stack (see my column "[Test of Endurance](#)" if you want to know how that topic came up). Noah Weil, [magicthegathering.com](#) columnist and GDS candidate, has been sitting in on a class on game design that Richard Garfield is currently teaching and after class one day, he asked Richard what he would change about Alpha if he could go back in time. Richard's answer? He'd add The Stack.



So The Stack is one of the most important parts of the game. Why are you instructing designers not to talk about it? That, my faithful readers, is the topic of today's column. I've "stacked" it, if you will. (If you don't like bad puns, Making **Magic** might not be the column for you.)

## Love Stack

Before I explain why we're so shy to talk about The Stack, I wanted to take a little time to talk about where The Stack came from, a little history for you to enjoy. Most of you playing **Magic** now (statistically speaking at least) have never known The Stack to not be part of the game, but it wasn't always that way. The Stack was part of a major rules overhaul commonly known as Sixth Edition Rules (named as such because they were introduced in conjunction with Sixth Edition).

Why did the major rules overhaul come about? Because **Magic** really, really needed it. When Richard first created **Magic**, he and the playtesters had worked out the basic rules. The problem was that trading card games by their design have an insane number of interactions. No simple system could figure out everything, so the original design gave you guidelines to help players figure out decisions for themselves and then told the players to figure it out for themselves. Seriously. Here's an excerpt from the Alpha rulebook (to see the whole thing click [here](#)):

### About the Rules

If a card contradicts the rules, the card takes precedence.

Be prepared to encounter house versions of this game when you play someone you haven't played before. These rules are a framework from which to start; after you know how to play, your play group may develop local rules, new ways to play particular cards, or other variations. Just be sure before you start that everyone is playing the same game.

During the course of a game, a dispute that you cannot solve by referencing the rules may occur. If both players agree, you can resolve the difference for the current game with a coin toss. After the duel, you can come to a decision about how you want to play such a situation in the future. If the players don't agree to a coin toss, both players retrieve their ante and the duel is a draw.

As **Magic** grew into the mega-hit it is now, it became clear that there needed to be more rules to support things that were not covered in the current rules. This was done in a bit of an ad hoc fashion. Each time a problem came up, a solution would be figured out. Sometimes this would sync up with other areas of the rules, other times not so much. To illustrate let me walk you through an example of what is now a very well understood ability - protection.

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Why do I bring up protection when The Stack is all about timing? Because I kind of understood the protection rules. I had no clue how timing actually worked. Remember back then we had the card type interrupt which acts kind of like split second but interrupts could respond to other interrupts? Yes, different spells worked at different speeds. In one of the early Duelists (Wizards' magazine dedicated to **Magic** - the spiritual forerunner of [magicthegathering.com](http://magicthegathering.com)), then-rules manager Tom Wylie explained the current timing rules through a flow chart dressed up to look like a [rat maze](#). My point is that as crazy as the early rules were, little was as chaotic as how timing worked.

Bill Rose (the current VP of R&D) was one of the original playtesters and started working in R&D a few weeks before I did. One of Bill's early quests (and one of his most important) was cleaning up the rules. Bill was the lead of the team who created the Sixth Edition rules. One of Bill's major goals was to get rid of what was then known as The Batch, This was the predecessor of The Stack. While The Batch had internal logic, it was very hard to follow and was often not intuitive. The Stack was created as a way to simplify and consolidate how timing worked. While beloved now, it got a very mixed reaction when we announced it (by mixed I mean a "This is going to kill **Magic**"-type response - that isn't as dire as it sounds because almost every major change and many minor ones were also predicted as the sign of **Magic's** death).

We're now over a thousand words into this column, and all I've done is stress over and over how important The Stack is. Shouldn't something this important be talked about in card text? No. (Or more accurately, not much.) More on this in the next section.

## Not What It's Stacked Up To Be

To explain R&D's current take on The Stack, I'm going to use a metaphor. (If you don't like metaphors, Making **Magic** is also not the column for you.) Imagine **Magic** as a car. The Stack (along with the rest of the current rules) is the engine. It's quite important. Without it, the car doesn't run. Anyone who uses the car is mighty glad the engine is there. But here's the important point. Most people don't really care how the engine works. They just want it to make the car move. As long as it does that, it's doing its job. The majority of the **Magic**-playing public only wants to know enough to drive the car. They hear someone start to talk about the engine and they tune out. That's for mechanics (a.k.a. rules gurus).

From time to time I'll stretch a metaphor to make it fit, but this one is pretty dead on. We don't talk about The Stack, because the majority of players don't want to talk about The Stack. How do I know this? For starters, we have a great resource to find out what's confusing our public - [Wizards of the Coast's Customer Service](#). This is an entire section of the company dedicated to helping out any one who needs guidance with any one of our games. If you have a problem you can email or call Customer Service and they'll help you solve it, whether it be a bad booster, a desire to find a tournament, information about a release date, something you find offensive or, most commonly, a rules question.

If I want to know what's confusing our customers, I talk to Customer Service. This is, for example, one of the reasons we've been shifting X spells away from common over time. The concept of X throws a lot of people. We've also moved away from certain templates (**Dead Ringers**, I'm looking at you). Do you want to know the word that historically causes the most confusion? The one that generates tons of calls each and every time we use it? You guessed it, "stack."

This of course leads to a few questions:



## Why are you catering to the lowest common denominator? Isn't Magic a game for smart people?

Every time R&D does anything to remove some aspect of the game that we feel is unneeded complication, we get accused of "dumbing down the game." My response: Are you playing the same game I am? **Magic** is one of the most complicated games in the history of games. The knowledge of the game is so vast that it is physically impossible for one person to even absorb all the information. *And* the game keeps changing, adding more and more information meaning it's constantly getting more complicated. The real question isn't "Are we dumbing down the game too fast?" It's "Are we dumbing down the game fast enough?"

If **Magic** started catering to the top one percent, guess what happens? Ninety-nine percent stop playing because they don't "get it." We have to cater to the lowest common denominator because we want everyone who plays the game to be able to play it. Note that there are people below our threshold. We just don't expect them to play for any great length of time. We don't consider them our audience. But the people we consider our audience, we plan to support, and that means making sure they know enough to drive the car.

On last thing, if you're playing **Magic**, you're not a dummy.

## If The Stack is so important, shouldn't you be teaching the public what it is?

Be aware that the things you need to know about The Stack aren't that great. Here they are in a nutshell: (a thanks to **Magic** Lead Editor Del Laugel for spelling this out so nicely in one of her posts in one of *The Great Designer Search* threads)

- When it's your turn you basically get to do anything first.
- If anyone else does something, you always get a chance to respond (yes, barring split second).
- You always have a chance to do something before the game moves on.
- You understand the difference between the following two scenarios:

1) You play **Shock** on my 2/2 creature. I respond by playing **Giant Growth**. (The creature is a 5/5 with 2 damage on it.)

2) I play **Giant Growth** on my 2/2 creature. You respond by playing **Shock**. (The creature is dead.)

The above is enough for ninety-nine percent of all gameplay. Knowing more is nice and does occasionally allow some neat tricks, but it's a luxury, not a necessity.

In fact, this philosophy carries through all of **Magic**. Our goal is not to teach players everything. I don't even think it's possible. Our goal is to make sure they know enough to play and to make sure they're aware where resources exist to help them. This is why we spend so much energy on making our mechanics grokkable (see my column "[Between a Grok and a Hard Place](#)" if you don't understand what grokkable means) and intuitive. Having the cards work the way players would assume is vital to this goal.

## But wait, you guys use the word "stack" on cards. Split second is an entire mechanic that has the word "stack" in its reminder text.

Not referencing the stack is a rule, but **Magic** is the game all about breaking the rules. So yes, this means we do occasionally mention the stack. But when we do we make sure three things are true:

One, that the card or mechanic is worth it. We don't go to this well unless we believe the card(s) in question are special enough to make the exception.

Two, that the basic concept of what the card is doing is graspable despite understanding specifically what The Stack is. **Time Stop** ends the turn now, and **Split Second** lets you play a spell so fast that nothing can respond to it. The grokkability of these cards allows us to sneak in reference to the Stack. Please note that we almost always keep it out of the main text instead putting it in reminder text where we've trained players that the more technical wording goes.

Three, we don't make the mechanic revolve around understanding how The Stack works. If you have to ask another player, they should be able to explain to you what is happening without having to first get you up to speed on The Stack. This, by the way, was the area where most of the designers in The Great Designer Search originally messed up.

## Hop In The Stack

And that, my faithful reader, is why we tend not to refer to The Stack in card text. Whew, I wouldn't have guessed this topic would have filled over 2500 words. If any of you have other questions like The Stack one, please feel free to write me. I enjoy writing columns explaining why we make the decisions we do, so if you have a burning question about why we do something we do, please ask away. Who knows, maybe you'll be the catalyst of a future column.

Join me next week when I...well, when I don't do anything, actually. What am I talking about? Definitely check back next Monday for a memorable theme week. (As another quick plug, I'm doing the feature article next week - also check it out.)

Until then, may you learn the value of inclusion.

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*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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