

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



# Hidden Treasures

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Making Magic

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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Welcome to Easter Egg Week! I guess I should begin by explaining what we mean by the term “Easter egg.” The term started as a definition of the colored and decorated eggs that are used to celebrate the Christian holiday of Easter. Why an egg? Because the egg has long been a symbol of birth and rebirth (long before the start of Christian religion, by the way). It was incorporated into Easter as it symbolically matched the holiday’s recognition of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As part of the festivities, the tradition began of hiding Easter eggs for children to find. Thus Easter eggs became associated with something that was hidden and needed to be found. Many, many years later along came the computer. Some early programmers found it entertaining to work messages into the code that could only be found by someone else looking through the code. Over time, this practice evolved to programmers hiding different elements in a program for the user to find. These elements often had inside jokes and were never announced in any official capacity. The idea was that user would stumble upon them or be told by others where to look.



With time the concept of an Easter egg expanded beyond computers. Other complex properties that had a lot of detail would, much like the computer programs, have elements subtly added for the user to find. One such product is **Magic**. This week we’re going to be exploring some of the Easter eggs of **Magic**. The topic is especially timely as *Time Spiral* is the most Easter egg packed **Magic** set ever created. If you’ve come looking for specific references to Easter eggs, you come to the right site but the wrong column. While everyone else is going to spend the week pointing out lots of goodies that you may or may not have noticed, I thought I would take “Making Magic” to explain why **Magic** (or any game for that matter) has Easter eggs. I’m looking beyond the individual eggs for the motivation for hiding them in the first place.

Here are the reasons I feel **Magic** is benefited by Easter eggs:

**#1: Easter Eggs Create Moments Of Discovery** – I have explained numerous times how I feel **Magic** is at its heart a game of discovery. Much of the joy of the game comes from the thrill the players get seeking out hidden information. In fact, if you follow the life cycle of an expansion, you’ll see how each stage has its own type of discovery.

First comes the time before the set is released. At this point, the players know next to nothing about the set. They are trying to learn big picture things. What is the set’s theme? What is the set’s mechanics? How will this set be different than other sets? This desire to learn what is coming drives bulletin board threads and rumor mills. It gets the players talking about what might be. This desire is why **magicthegathering.com’s** biggest audience happen during preview weeks. This stage is marked by the players learning of the possibilities of the set.

Next comes the period which starts at the prerelease and runs through the release. At this point, the players begin having access to the card list. (Many players even wait to learn the cards by opening packs – bless them.) This exploration is about what cards and mechanics actually exist. Rather than a time of speculation, this stage is about beginning to process the known. What are the cards exactly? What do they do? What do the new mechanics do? This is also the time of first impressions. A quite popular article theme during this time is card-by-card evaluations.

The following period is defined by the players trying to understand how the cards relate to one another. They spent the previous period understanding what the cards were; now they being processing the interrelation between them. How do the cards work together? What cards and/or mechanics have synergy? How do the pieces of this set fit together? This stage is defined by the players trying to understand the cards as they relate to one another.

The fourth stage is the period where the players try to understand the larger context of the set. How does this expansion complement other expansions available in the same format? How does it shift the current metagame? What strategies have strengthened or weakened? This stage is marked by the players starting to experiment with decks.

This leads into the final stage, where the players begin to figure out the optimization of the current card pool not in a vacuum but in relation to what the rest of the world is doing with the new expansion. This is the part where players try to understand in this snapshot of time what is the best deck available. This is the point where players break through the discovery process into the part where the strategy is organized. This is where most games start to veer into major theory and massive memorization. The understanding of the game begins to crystallize as

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players start to “get” the game. The genius of **Magic** is how each expansion returns the process back to the first stage.

So what does this have to do with Easter eggs? A lot. Because discovery is so important in **Magic**, players tend to study the game very closely. This heavy scrutiny guarantees both that the Easter eggs will be found and that they will be appreciated. The Easter eggs become another facet of the quest that drives the game. Most importantly, they add to the overall joy of discovery. Easter eggs make the players work to find them, but this effort is rewarded, because Easter eggs tend to hold more meaning and relevance than the average piece of information.

**#2: Feeling “In”** – People by their nature want to belong. It’s actually built into our genes. Humans are not solitary animals. We are driven by our genes to interact. (Unlike most animals,

our mating requires complex social interaction.) Many social institutions are built around the human need to feel included.

What does this have to do with games? Quite a bit. You see, **Magic** isn’t really a game. Okay, okay, it is a game, but it is much more than that. **Magic** is a hobby. People who play **Magic** spend a great deal of time involved in the game during which they aren’t playing. Maybe they’re talking about their previous games or discussing strategy or working on their latest deck or trading for cards or reading columns like this about **Magic**. The point is that **Magic** is a lifestyle. Many players who play have made the conscious decision to dedicate time to the game.

One of the ways to reward this behavior is with Easter eggs. Why? Because only this subgroup will get the Easter egg. And they know this fact. Thus, finding something that many others will not makes players feel part of an “in” group, that of the dedicated **Magic** player. They also get the double bonus of not only finding the Easter egg but of understanding it. How does the rest of the player base feel? Fine; you see, if they don’t find it, they don’t even know it exists. Easter eggs are only visible to those who understand them.

**#3: Show Off History/Reward Dedication** – This reason is an offshoot of the last one. Since only the dedicated player will find and understand the Easter egg, the people that generate them (R&D – particularly the Creative team) have to go to lengths to ensure that they mean something. Because we don’t look outward in the game (meaning that we don’t use our game to reference things outside the game – and yes, I know we’ve broken this rule, but it is the rare exception) we are forced to look within.



This means that our Easter eggs have an in-game relevance, one that plays into the subset of players they are made for in the first place. The person who has dedicated years of his life to the game is the one happiest to see things referenced from the game, and thus his, past. This is, for instance, one of the reasons I believe *Time Spiral* is doing so well. It plays directly into the feel-good emotions of the audience. (This, incidentally, is why nostalgia is such a powerful force – it taps into pre-existing positive emotions and connects them to something new.)

Easter eggs thus reward players for dedication to the game. The player who’s been with the game since Alpha simply picks up more references than the player that started last week. This is why, incidentally, that our Easter eggs tend to cover huge areas of time. We want references to Alpha as much as we do to *Legends* or *Tempest* or *Urza’s Saga* or *Invasion*. We want every player to find Easter eggs that are relevant to him or her.

***Easter eggs reward players for dedication to the game.***

Finally, the Easter eggs let us show off our past. Players will be exposed to Easter eggs that they would not find if not pointed out by some one else. But once exposed to them, these players will also get a chance to glimpse where **Magic** has come from. And as we get to pick and choose our references, we get to show off the best parts of the game’s past.

**#4: Create Meta-Issues For Players To Talk About** – Easter eggs make the players feel happy. They make them feel “in.” They teach them about the past. Where does this lead? It gives the players something to talk about with one another. Easter eggs can become a topic of conversation. In a game that values its community, this is a powerful thing.

I keep talking about how **Magic** is a lifestyle. For this to be true, it has to affect the way people live. It has to affect the way people connect. Nothing does a better job of that than a shared experience. Time and again I get letters that talk about how the letter-writer went to a strange place where they knew nobody. But then they met one person playing **Magic**, and all of a sudden a whole network of friends opened up. **Magic** is a shared life experience. People who have dedicated time to it will bond with others who have done the same.

How do we help this along? By giving this community lots of opportunity to bond over issues. True Easter eggs are just one small piece in a large puzzle, but every little bit helps. When you find a cool Easter egg hidden in a piece of flavor text or in the art, you are compelled to share this discovery with your **Magic** friends because you know that they will appreciate your discovery.

**#5: Make Commentary Not Allowed In the Game** – Another interesting by-product of Easter eggs is that they unto themselves allow the creators to communicate ideas that cannot be communicated elsewhere. Because Easter eggs are hidden, they have a little more freedom to make commentary. **Magic** as a rule doesn't self-reference itself as a game. That is, within the world of **Magic**, magic is magic and not a game of cards.

I will admit that this benefit is a small one, but it does allow the people who make the game to say a few things we might never else get a chance to say (well, in the context of the game anyway).

**#6: Entertain the Creators** – Last (and maybe least), Easter eggs make the game more fun to make. As much as all of you enjoy the Easter eggs, I think those of us behind the scenes enjoy them even more. We spend so much time obsessing over every little detail that it's fun to leave a few little things lying around to see if anyone catches it.



I thought about avoiding discussion of this benefit, but I realized that it wasn't honest not to talk about it. In fact, this reason is probably why Easter eggs started. The first programmers that hid messages in the code were entertaining themselves more than anyone else. I do believe over time that creators have begun to see the value of Easter eggs and that they continue for reasons beyond this one, but I do think that in the beginning, this "benefit" was the impetus for their creation.

As an aside, I always take great joy in reading the internet to see what things people figure out. I know when I made *Unglued* and *Unhinged*, for instance, I crammed as many jokes as I could possibly fit in each set. (I wrote a [feature article](#) during *Unglued* Week about some of the jokes in that set.) Every time someone figured out another joke I had squirreled away I would get a big smile on my face. I even made a bet with someone in R&D that the audience would figure out the flavor text of **Rocket-Powered Turbo Slug** that was scrambled up by the speeding slug. (They did, within twenty-four hours – I never bet against our audience figuring something out).



## Eggs-cellent

The real point of today's column is to show you that little things do, in fact, mean a lot. While Easter eggs are fun to do, the reasons for doing them run pretty deep. They tie into many of the core aspects of what makes **Magic** tick. I hope my column today has demonstrated some ways in which this is so.

Join me next week when I... well, when I take a break for three weeks. Yes, starting next week **magcithegathering.com** goes on a two and a half week holiday hiatus. During that time each author will be picking his favorite columns of the year. During the next three weeks, you'll get to see my top three. Wonder what they are? Check back and see.

Until then, may you look at your cards just a little more intently.

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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