

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



When the Going Gets Bluff

Mark Rosewater
Making Magic
Monday, February 12, 2007



Welcome to Bluff Week! No, really. Would I lie to you? Sure, I might playfully mislead you, but outright lying isn't my cup of tea. (Of course I don't drink tea, so even tea isn't my cup of tea.) Today that will change. Not permanently, mind you – just for this column.

You see, many weeks ago I was approached by Kelly Digges, the editor of magicthegathering.com, and asked if I would be okay writing on topic for Bluff Week. With one notable exception (the week I revealed that our April Fool's joke [wasn't so outlandish](#)), I've written on topic for every theme week magicthegathering.com has ever had, so, as always, I said sure. What was I going to write about? I had no clue.

At first I considered writing about how design creates cards that use elements of bluffing, but as I started mapping it out I realized I had one good story about how Richard Garfield designed Cursed Scroll and I was out of material. (The story, if you don't know it, appeared in abbreviated form in my column about *Tempest* design, "[When They Were Young](#)." So I started brainstorming ideas for today's column. And then it hit me. What if I bluffed in my bluffing column? What if I had a little fun with my readers? Here's how it's going to work: Today I came up with four real crazy **Magic**-related stories. These stories actually happened. (Okay, okay, with a smidgen of dramatic license.) Then, to make it fun and stay on theme, I came up with one more equally crazy story that didn't happen. Elements of that story are based on kernels of truth, but the events themselves are complete fabrications. Your job today is to separate the truths from the lie.

For extra fun, I'm not going to put up the answers to what is the truth and what isn't until Tuesday's update (the one that happens on what many of you think of as Monday night). Check back then to see what's what. Finally, because some people in these stories come across looking less than perfect, I'm not using names unless it happens to be mine (or it's clear public record). Remember, four of the stories you are about to read really happened. The other one didn't. Can you tell which is which?

Story #1 – Lest Thee Be Judged

I was one of the earliest people to get a DCI card. Yes, back when you had to pay for the honor and got a lovely four-digit number on a laminated paper card. Shortly thereafter I started doing freelance work for Wizards, and I was kindly asked to stop playing in sanctioned events. This means that I haven't played in all that many high-level events (oh, I've attended plenty). The two premier events I played in were the 1994 U.S. National and World Championships. I'll have to leave my Worlds story for another day. (Although you can get glimpses of it in an old *Duelist* article – my first *Duelist* article by the way – that was [reprinted](#) several years back on magicthegathering.com.) Today's story is all about 1994 Nationals (and 1995 Nationals is coming up in a story right after).

My dad (for those that don't keep track of all the personal items I mention in my column, my dad plays **Magic**) and I attended the 1994 Origins Convention in San Jose, California, and that just happened to be the location of the very first ever U.S. National Championship for **Magic: The Gathering**. I had played in my share of tournaments, but nothing held a candle to the prospect of becoming the U.S. National Champion. To set the stage for the more shocking aspect of my story, let me explain that it was mid-summer. At the time, there weren't very many card sets available: Alpha and Beta, Unlimited, *Arabian Nights*, *Antiquities*, Revised, and *Legends* (which had just been released).

As the tournament is about to begin, a man dressed completely in leather stood up on a chair and said the following: "Hi, I'm the head judge. Before we begin I want to make a quick announcement. A couple days ago we made a slight change to this tournament and I know it's possible that some of you haven't seen the web site since the notice went up. Because new product has been somewhat hard to obtain, we've decided to disallow all cards with expansion symbols from the tournament. We'll give you half an hour to make any necessary changes."

The audience was in shock. Imagine showing up to a tournament with a deck only to find out that over half the cards had basically been banned at the start of the tournament. But it gets better. We asked about cards that had appeared in either *Arabian Nights* or *Antiquities* that had been reprinted in Revised without an expansion symbol. After a moment of thought (because the idea had never occurred to them), they replied that the Revised version without the expansion symbol would be allowable. The original black-bordered versions with the expansion symbol would not. Yes, only certain versions of particular cards were allowed. The



PRODUCTS

PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

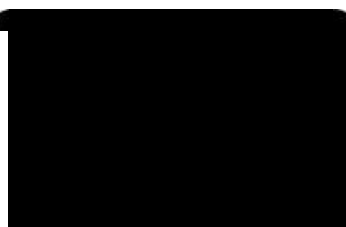
Final Wrap-up
[Top 8 Video Archives](#)

MAGIC ONLINE

MESSAGE BOARDS

Magic General Forum
magicthegathering.com Forum

RULES



audience then brought up the *Antiquities* card **Reconstruction** that was accidentally printed without an expansion symbol. After another moment, the judges ruled that *that* card allowable.

Here's the second fun part. After springing the news on us that over half the card pool had been instantly banned, they give us thirty minutes to not just build a new deck but find the appropriate versions. Bo Bell, the man who would go on to win that tournament, approached my dad and me looking for Revised **Racks**. He had a monoblack deck build around discard. **The Racks** were pretty vital to the deck. Bo had found two Revised copies, and he was looking for two more. My dad had two. Bo traded him a *Legends* booster pack for them (an insane trade, in my dad's favor, at the time, but with thirty minutes and a roomful of other players looking for the same cards, Bo knew he had to strike fast).

The deck I brought to the tournament was built around artifacts. Suffice to say *Antiquities* played a major role. Oddly, I wasn't able to rebound quite as fast as Bo. I was knocked out in the second round (the tournaments back then were single elimination, as Swiss rounds hadn't yet become the standard). Which leads us to our next story...



Story #2 – Same Time Next Year

We flash forward to the following year at the 1995 U.S. National Championship. The same leather-clad head judge was presiding. He obviously had a year in which to get some more experience under his belt. Did it do any good? I don't want to keep you hanging, so let's just check the "no" box. But I'll get back to that in a moment.

The year had made a world of difference for me. In 1994, my only tie to Wizards was the *Magic: the Puzzling* column I did in *The Duelist*. A year later, I had begun doing various freelance projects for Wizards, and they had flown me to Origins (that year in Philadelphia) to work at U.S. Nationals. Technically I was there to cover the event for *The Duelist*, but I helped out where I could. The important point was that in a year's time I had jumped sides from player to staff. Still, I wasn't yet a full-fledged Wizards employee, so much of what I saw was more as an outsider with a ringside seat.

The event began with the head judge sitting the players down for a group meeting. Perhaps it would better be classified as a group discussion. Back in the day, the limited portion of the tournament was Sealed Deck, as Draft wasn't popularized until the Pro Tour the following year. There was some debate as to how much sealed product was the right amount to make it as "fair" as possible. This discussion went on for *three hours*. I'm sure some of you might think I'm exaggerating slightly for comic effect. I'm not. I don't have to. The 1995 U.S. National Championship started with a three-hour discussion about how the tournament should be run. How can I be more comic than that?

But the fun didn't stop there. So Mark Justice beat Henry Stern (yes, R&D's own Henry Stern) in a tough-fought two-match final (it was double elimination, and Mark had won the loser's bracket). What did Mark win for being the 1995 U.S. National Champion? A **Magic** jean jacket with a Nightmare picture on the back. What did Henry, the runner-up, win? A signed **Sage of Lat-Nam**. Please click the card link (or look to the side). Second best in the United States, then the dominant country in **Magic** play, and he gets a signed copy of a card that wasn't good enough for tournaments.



Story #3 – Catch the Video

Flash forward three quarters of a year, and we find ourselves at the very first Pro Tour. I had started in R&D the previous fall and had talked my way into the job of R&D liaison to the Pro Tour (I had spent a number of years as a prominent judge in the L.A. area). I was very involved in the planning of the Pro Tour itself but was less connected to many of the items surrounding the Pro Tour. One such item was the Pro Tour video.

We knew we were going to make a video about the first Pro Tour and camera crews were hired for the event. I, along with two other Wizards employees (another from R&D and one from customer service with a performing background) were tapped as "talent" (the industry word for the people who work in front of the camera) to do live commentary and run any interviews or narration. My background is in communications (I went to Boston University's College of Communication). As such, I was much more familiar with video production than most anyone else at Wizards, so I was more than happy to jump in as talent.

So we got back from the Pro Tour, and I was called to the office of the man in charge of the organized play department. He informed me that he was putting the video in my hands. I was in charge. It was up to me to make sure that the PT I video got made. It was at this point that I stress that if I was going to be in charge of the video, I really needed to know that *before* the event. If I was going to produce it, I would have done the necessary preproduction work to make sure that we knew what we wanted and ensure that we got it. What's done is done, he tells me. We have the footage that we have. I'm going to have to make it work. I've got two weeks.

What? What! Two weeks? Oh yes, they had already presold the product, and to get it out on schedule they had to book the dubbing time (industry speak for the official copying and making of the individual video cassettes). That

left us two weeks to edit it. They had graciously booked me two weeks of editing time. One more thing – In order to sell it they had to have a running time. They had decided on ninety minutes. If the actual tape wasn't exactly ninety minutes, there might be some fraud issues.

Don't worry, it gets worse. No one had told R&D that they needed my time for this project (remember that this was an organized play project – a different section of the company). It turns out that R&D was rushed on their own projects and that I wouldn't be able to work on the video during my normal working hours. I would have to edit at night after an eight-hour day of my normal workload.



Not done getting worse yet. When I checked out what footage we had, I learned a few things. The live commentary wasn't appropriate for the video (both in sound quality and content). The audio mixers for some reason only recorded the mix feed and didn't record the separate tracks. (This means that they took all the different pieces they recorded and mixed them all together so that you were unable to hear just one particular mike. I'm sure the vast majority of my readers have never worked with audio so let me put this in context – trained monkeys doing audio would record each track; it is so basic a tenet of audio that I literally didn't believe it when I first found out.) What this meant was that I didn't have usable audio for any gameplay – you know, the stuff making up the vast majority of the show.

Still getting worse. This next problem is a bit technical, but I'll walk you through the gist of it. When you record video, you record something that lets you keep track of time. If you've ever seen raw video, you know how you always see a clock running on the tape (called timecode). That clock is crucial to the editing process because the editor needs to know exactly where on a tape a needed segment is. Anyway, the crew didn't lay down the part that was needed to lay over the timecode. This was another technical mistake so basic that I couldn't believe it had happened. What this meant was that I was going to lose valuable hours of editing fixing the tapes so they could be edited.

So had I hit the bottom? Of course not. This next part, though, will take a little set-up. In the early days of Wizards, there were a lot of vice presidents. A lot. Right now, for example, I think there are single digits of vice presidents, and we have more employees now than during the time period I'm talking about. Back then I believe the vice presidents numbered in the high twenties or low thirties. Anyway, one of the problems with so many vice presidents was that there weren't always things for them to do. Sensing my apprehension, the head of organized play assigned the video a vice president.

I love metaphors, so let me explain what was going on. I was asked to swim the English Channel. Now, I had swimming experience, but still – the English Channel! To help me, I was given a straight-jacket. This vice president was a nice person who had zero video production experience. Their vision of what the video was supposed to be was way far away from what I was told it was supposed to be (this is how, for example, the music video that ends the show wound up on the tape). I would come in at night to find out that they edited things during the day that I had to completely re-edit.

An insane deadline, no added resources save a person who was actively contradicting the vision, crazy technical difficulties, all while I was doing a full-time job. But I got it done – and at exactly ninety minutes.

Story #4 – All Torn Up

So there's this **Magic** artist. He began painting early in **Magic's** history and illustrated numerous iconic pieces. Because of this, Wizards of the Coast occasionally flew him to various Pro Tours and other premier events around the world. His job at these events was to sit and sign cards. For our story, the Pro Tour in question was in Europe in a non-English speaking country. The artist, an American, was flown in from the States for the event.

To understand what is about to happen, I have to give you a little background. This artist was proud of most of his **Magic** artwork. I say most because there were a few pieces he had done early in the game that he wasn't too proud of. One piece in particular so embarrassed him that he refused to sign it. Over time this practice slowly gave way to a new one: Whenever he was given this card to sign, he would tell the card's owner how much he hated it and then rip it up on the spot. As was then his practice he would apologize for ripping the card up and offer the owner something in return of equal value.

Let's return to the European Pro Tour. It was several days into the event and the tournament hall had been filled to capacity. Tons of local players had shown up, and many of them were eager to have their cards signed by the guest artists. This had led to some long days, and the artist was tired and a little on the grumpy side. Up stepped a seven year old. The boy had one card. You see, he had just started playing recently and he didn't own many cards. The card he brought was the one card he owned illustrated by the artist. I assume you can see where this is going.

The boy handed over his card. The artist, because he was tired, didn't make his normal joke about hating the card. He just ripped it up. The little boy was in shock. When you hand over a card for an artist to sign, watching it get torn to pieces in front of your eyes really isn't on the short list of things you expect to happen to the card. After the moment of shock, the boy started crying. I'm not talking about a soft, single tear down the cheek. No, this is crying at the top of your lungs as only a seven-year-old is capable of.

This isn't the reaction the artist expected (as odd as that might sound). He wants to try and correct the problem but encounters a few roadblocks. One, the child doesn't speak English and the artist doesn't speak the local language. Two, the artist didn't have another copy of the card in question as he ripped up every one he got his hands on. Three, the crying drew the attention of the crowd. As the crowd quickly surmised what just happened, let's just say they didn't opt to side with the artist. It started getting ugly.

Top-level tournament people were called. The best visual I can give you is that it was kind of like stopping a riot with a water hose, except in this case the water hose was free **Magic** product. The kid was given more **Magic** paraphernalia than he probably knew existed, and an international **Magic** incident was averted.



Story #5 – "Help Letterman!"

This last story takes us back to the days shortly before *Tempest's* release (the summer of '97 if my memory serves me). We were long done with *Tempest* from an R&D standpoint. In fact, the first printing of the product had just begun. How do I know? Because a common practice is for the printer to take some cards from the starting of the printing and send them to us. Then different people in the company take a look and make sure everything's okay. One of those people is a member of R&D. When they do their official check, it usually draws the attention of other R&D members who are curious to see what the final printed cards look like.

Anyway, *Tempest* arrived. I was more excited than normal as *Tempest* was the first set for which I lead the design team. I was very involved with the story and had been on the teams that wrote and selected the names and flavor text. As such, I was quite excited to see the new cards. As I was thumbing through the cards I came across *Death Pits of Rath*, a rare black enchantment. Here's the flavor text that appears on the card as you know it:

As the sludge below began to shift and take shapes, Gerrard turned from the railing to Orim. "I suppose," he said, "it's a little too late for prayer, isn't it?"

This is a family-friendly site so let me just say a letter was missing from the above text. Our editing team is very good and mistakes such as this rarely happen (even less so nowadays), but every once in a blue moon (especially in the earlier days) something slips through. Our policy is that we let misprints stand. This misprint, though, seemed a little different.

I immediately took the card to editing. Unfortunately both Magic editors were on vacation (it was summer, after all), so I went to the highest ranking editor. She immediately saw my issue but literally didn't know what to do. She didn't work on Magic, so she didn't even know who to contact. And thus began a comic sequence where we went from person to person trying to find someone with a solution.

Here's how it would play out: I'd show the card to someone. They wouldn't get my concern. I'd tell them to read the flavor text again but slower. Then their eyes would go wide and they would say, "We can't print this."

They would then invariably ask some variation of "Is this printed yet?" to which I would answer some variation of "It's in your hand."

Finally, they would agree with me that it was a problem that needed fixing and then they would suggest the name of a new person. Then the whole group, everyone I had talked to up to that point, would follow along. Sort a human snowball, if you will.

Finally, we got to the head of our CAPS department (the section in charge of having the cards printed). He took one look at the card and picked up his phone. For the first and to my knowledge the only time ever, we stopped the presses.

Around this time the news had made its way to the president, who found our wandering band in the CAPS manager's office. He suggested that we make our way to the conference room (called the WOR Room – aka the "War" Room – WOR stood for Weekly Operating Report for those with a need to know acronyms). We began the meeting by talking through other cards that had been printed with questionable things on them. We had a card whose name we were unaware at the time was a slur. There was another card whose title was also an obscure reference to something we would never normally reference. There was a card for which the artist had used text from a real world document that some people felt was offensive. But nothing was quite as blatant (and easily recognizable) as this. Plus, in each of those cases we hadn't learned the issue until after the public saw the cards. In fact, in each case it was the public who informed us of the issue.

Within the hour we found out the extent of the damage – a substantial number of cards had already been printed. Going through them by hand to remove the *Death Pits of Rath* would both cost a lot of money and take time we didn't have if we wanted the product to come out on its release date. There were only two choices: Release it or burn it. The first was a PR nightmare and the second would cost a lot of money. As the meeting plodded on, the lower-down employees such as myself were slowly weeded out.



It was time to go home, but all of R&D stuck around (which we do most the time anyway) to hear the outcome. Hours later the VP of R&D came back to his office. "So?" we asked. "We're burning it," he replied.

I'm sure I'll get letters, so let me cut this off at the pass. To the best of my knowledge, no copies of the **Death Pits of Rath** in question still exist. The printer destroyed all the cards they had, and the ones in the office were confiscated. That said, whenever you run across a black-bordered copy of the card, it couldn't hurt to take a peek at the flavor text.



Fact or Fiction

Four of the above stories are completely true and one's a bald-faced lie. Can you call my bluff? Tune back in to this column on the Tuesday update to see if you guessed correctly.

Join me next week when I explain why rules are made to be broken.

Until then, may you enjoy the pleasure of a little white lie.

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.*



[Discuss](#) on the message boards



[Respond](#) via email



[Mark Rosewater](#) archive

[About Us](#) | [Jobs](#) | [New to the Game?](#) | [Inside Wizards](#) | [Find a Store](#) | [Press](#) | [Help](#) | [Sitemap](#)

© 1995-2007 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

