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Breaking Rules

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Making Magic
Monday, February 19, 2007



PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Before I jump into today's topic, I want to quickly follow up from [last week](#). Due to some technical issues, my reveal of which story was fake ended up in my thread rather than in the article itself. As such, I'm guessing some of you don't yet know which story was pulling your leg. Let me start by clearing things up.



Story #1 - Lest Thee Be Judged (The '94 U.S. Nationals Story) - TRUE. This really happened. It demonstrates how far the DCI has come.

Story #2 - Same Time Next Year (The '95 U.S. Nationals Story) - TRUE. This also happened. We still kid Henry about the Sage of Lat-nam to this day.

Story #3 - Catch the Video (The PT I Video Story) - TRUE. To hear more about it, you can check out the commentary Henry Stern and I did for a [feature last year](#).

Story #4 - All Torn Up (The Artists Ripping Up The Card Story) - TRUE. Outrageous but true.

Story #5 - "Help Letterman!" (The Accidental Profane Flavor Text Story) - FALSE. Complete and utter lie. All the references to other questionable cards was true. Many elements of the story were borrowed from other stories, but the event as I laid it out never happened.

And with that I'll go back to telling the truth (okay, okay, and occasionally being a little sneaky about it). But enough of last week's topic, let's talk about the issue at hand today. That issue: rule breaking. Okay, the title might have spoiled the surprise.

I guess I should begin by talking a little bit about the issue that prompted this topic. Those of you that pay attention to some of the subtler elements of the *Planar Chaos* design might have noticed that it took a few liberties with the color pie. As a result of this color-shifting, we received a lot of comments from the public. One comment in particular, while representing a small minority of the feedback, piqued my interest. The more I thought about it the more I realized it would make a good column topic. What was the comment? For emphasis, I'll write it in big letters:

"For years you've told us how important the color pie is. *Planar Chaos* demonstrates that obviously it isn't."

Here's what intrigued me about this comment. It makes a few assumptions:

- 1.) **Magic** cannot mess around with the key elements of the game.
- 2.) Qualities are defined by the exception rather than the rule.
- 3.) The newest set defines how R&D currently sees the game.

I think all three assumptions are false. But I can see why people might believe them to be true. In today's column I'm going to examine each assumption and talk about why I feel it isn't true.

Assumption #1: Magic cannot mess around with the key elements of the game.

I guess I'll begin with the blunt counter: What should we be messing with, the things that don't matter? (Wait for *Lorwyn*; we're going to do the collector numbers in reverse alphabetical order! And to stop the four letters I'll get, I'm joking.)

As I often say, **Magic's** lifeblood revolves around its ability to constantly adapt. The reason that the game holds players' attentions for so long is that it keeps changing its identity. Yet, and this is an important contrast, **Magic** manages to keep certain qualities as constants. This means that while the game keeps changing, it also stays the same. Because of this, many players jump to the conclusions that these constants can never change. This is a false assumption. They can change. What they can't do is all change at once.

To explain, let me use an example from my Hollywood days - sitcoms. (I haven't mentioned I wrote for "Roseanne" in months.) People turn into television much for the same reason they play games. They want to be entertained and they want to be comforted. Sitcoms, like all television shows, are all about being different each week without really being all that different. Each week has a different story but the characters, setting, tone and

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pacing are always the same.

As a show ages, it starts using up most of the obvious areas of story. As such, the writers have to start veering slightly farther away from the original base of the show. How do they do that? They take one of the elements listed above and change it. Perhaps they add in a new character. Maybe they take the cast to a new setting. Perhaps they try changing the tone or pacing. The key is that when they do this they need to keep all the other elements constant. If the gang goes on vacation, you have to keep the same group of characters that the audience knows and have the general tone and pacing stay the same. Likewise, if a new character gets added, you tend to bring the new character to the old setting.



Why? Because the audience is grounded in the familiar.

They'll accept new elements but only when surrounded by familiar ones. **Magic** is very similar. Each year we take you to a new world, but we look at the new world through the normal **Magic** lens. Red has direct damage, blue has counterspells and black has discard. Note that when *Time Spiral* block radically changed up how the colors worked (by either dipping into things the color used to do or exploring things the colors could do but never has done) we made sure to do it in the most known setting we have - Dominaria. This leads us to the next question: Why do we feel a need to mess with the fundamentals of the game?

For this metaphor I'll geek it up. In 1987, Paramount Pictures decided to reboot the Star Trek franchise with *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. In doing so, they wanted to create a new villain for the Federation - someone who would make the Klingons and Romulans seem tame by comparison. Ultimately this led to the creation of the Borg (a.k.a. the Borg Collective). The Borg had several interesting traits as villains. First, they functioned completely differently than any race that the Federation had ever met. They were a group mind that couldn't be reasoned with or threatened. Second, they had the ability to assimilate individuals. The Klingons could never turn you into a Klingon but the Borg could make you one of their own. Third, and this is the important one for our discussion, because of the collective mind, they had the ability to learn quickly. Any threat used against them only worked once. The Federation had to constantly create new ways to combat them.



What does this have to do with **Magic** design? Well, in this metaphor, design is the Federation and all of you are the Borg. With each set, it is design's job to surprise you. We have to take **Magic** in a direction it hasn't gone before. And if we approach a theme you've seen before we have to find a way to do it differently than last time. You see, like the Federation, once we spring a trick, it's used up. We can't use the same "attack" more than once.

The reason this is important is that when we talk about what design can and cannot do, you have to remember that design has a mighty task on his hands, one that keeps getting harder and harder. This means that we have to go back and look at things we've never chosen to do before. We have to figure out what the hurdles are and then we have to see if there is a way to clear the hurdle.

This doesn't mean that anything is fair game. For example, while *Planar Chaos* plays with the details of the color pie, it still stays true to the philosophies. We didn't make the black **Disenchant** or the blue **Ritual**. We are getting some ridicule about how *Planar Chaos* demonstrates that any mechanic can be flavored in any color. Rationalizing an explanation, though, is not the same thing as making spells that feel right. While we definitely pushed the boundaries on a few cards, the vast majority seem like natural extensions. Getting that feeling took a lot of work.

What does this mean for the future? It means that no area of the game should feel safe. Nothing is off limits. If some area of the game seems prime for fiddling, we might just fiddle with it. Just know that we'll do so keeping an eye on the big picture.

Assumption #2: Qualities are defined by the exception rather than the rule.

What do I mean by this? Let's use a *Planar Chaos* example. How do you see **Damnation**? Is **Damnation** playing with the ebb and flow of how good black is at creature sweepers or is it bringing black permanently up to white's level? Is **Damnation** a temporary thing or a permanent one? This is an important question because it cuts to a basic division in how players see the game.

I will call these two camps duration and conglomerate. The duration camp looks at the game through a modern lens. They care about what the game has done in the recent past. Now that past may be a year (Limited/Block Constructed), two years (Standard), or five to eight years (Extended), but it is always tempered by the idea that eventually everything will leave the system. The duration group just cares about how the game functions now (now being defined as the time period that they've chosen to care about). The conglomerate group, on the other hand, sees the game in its entirety. To them, **Magic** is every card ever printed (this encompasses the Vintage and Legacy communities).

To the duration group, the game is ever evolving and changing. To the conglomerate group, the game changes, but only in an additive way. Things don't leave the system; they are only added. This difference is fundamental, because it shapes how you perceive the game. Do mistakes or imbalances eventually fade away or are they a permanent fixture to the game? Can the environment shift radically or do major shifts take a long time? Can fundamentals change or are certain elements of the game always a given?

The reason it's important to understand this difference is that each approach requires a different design philosophy. If the environment is ever-changing and things can leave the system, you react differently than if the game has to live with every choice forever. So which does design embrace? The duration viewpoint. Why? Good question. There are a number of answers.



- 1.) **Duration design creates more interesting choices than conglomerate design.** If the system keeps refreshing, it allows the designers a chance to try radically new things. Things that cause problems naturally will leave the system.
- 2.) **Duration design makes it easier to make the game change.** As I said above, one of **Magic's** biggest selling points is its constantly adapting environment. Duration design lets you take things away. Exclusion is an important tool when you are trying to constantly reinvent a game.
- 3.) **Duration design allows you to shift what matters.** One of the most important tricks of block design is to focus the game on a different aspect than in recent years. To do that you have to give the players the tools to make it happen. If those tools never go away, it becomes very hard to shift the players to a different goal. For example, multicolor blocks give you resources to make playing more colors easier. If those tools never left, it makes it much harder to steer players towards monocolored strategies.
- 4.) **Duration design allows new players easier access to the game.** There's a reason that Standard is the dominant format. It has a lower barrier to entry both in money and in knowledge. It's easier to think about, as there are simply less factors and cards you need to concern yourself with. (I will point out that it has more upkeep as it changes more often, but the upkeep is more a factor for the experienced player.)

To circle this back to the beginning, duration design allows us to do things like mess with the color pie because we know it's temporary. Yes, green gets card drawing and blue has some creature kill for two years. But at the end of that time, the status quo gets to come back. This isn't true for the conglomerate audience. Whatever we added to colors will never go away. We know that. The conglomerate audience has to understand that design has chosen to take a duration approach, which we believe is healthier for the game in the long term.

Assumption #3: The newest set defines how R&D currently sees the game.

This assumption is the closest to the truth, as it's sometimes true. When we are making permanent shifts in the game, the most recent sets are the best means to understanding what R&D is up to. For example, we spent many years fixing the color pie. To see what we were doing, players had to study how mechanics were reflected in the latest cards. Why? Because to understand change you need to look at the end state.

Here's where this assumption gets you in trouble, though. **Magic** is all about adapting and changing. Not all these changes are designed to be permanent. Many changes are designed to be temporary. In fact, block design focuses on finding ways to make some facet of the game more important for a year, but just that year. To do this, the game tends to bleed in the direction of that block's themes. For instance, usually black and green are the two colors to focus on the graveyard, but have a graveyard theme and all of a sudden all five colors find a way to care about it.

Planar Chaos exacerbated this problem for two reasons. One, it's messing with the color pie, and we've educated the audience that the color pie changes with time. And two, in our attempt to make the changes feel natural we created many cards that seem acceptable. This has led to numerous emails and threads guessing what elements of *Planar Chaos* will become part of "normal" **Magic**. While I don't want to give everything away, I can say that the cards most likely to be seen outside *Planar Chaos* are the cards that you wouldn't have been surprised to see printed outside of *Planar Chaos* in the first place.



What this means is that *Planar Chaos* is not a portent of things to come (that set is coming next, though). Red is no more becoming a bounce color than *Odyssey* block would lead you to believe blue is becoming a graveyard color. We played around with something that made sense for that set at that time and now we're moving on.

Hmm, Pie

When history has a chance to look back at my reign as Head Designer, I want to be seen as someone who wasn't afraid to innovate and try new things. *Time Spiral* block was my attempt to try something a bit off the beaten path.

I wanted to play around in some areas that hadn't been played around before. One of the major areas was the color pie.

I didn't do so out of disrespect for the color pie. Nothing could be farther from the truth. As my numerous columns show (check my archive for my series of columns on the philosophies of the mono colors and on the two-color pairings) I have a great passion for the color pie. I believe it is one of the most important aspects (if not *the* most important aspect) of the game. I didn't fiddle with it because I didn't think it was important. I did so because I knew how important it was. To quote my favorite book, *A Whack on the Side of the Head* (hey, I mentioned Roseanne and *Whack* in the same column, I haven't done that in a while), "Sacred cows make great steaks."

The best part is that we're not even done yet with the *Time Spiral* block, and you all haven't even seen the craziest set yet. That topic is for another day, though.

I hope my column today has brought up a few issues to think about. I'd love to see some discussion in the thread. If the talk gets lively I'll try to jump in.

Join me next week when I examine something else that might have been.

Until then, may you have the strength to question the things you care about.

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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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