

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



Tales of a Runner

Mark Rosewater
 Making Magic
 Monday, March 5, 2007



PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Let's say a major gaming magazine decided that they wanted to start writing feature articles about personalities in the gaming world. Then of all the people they could have chosen they somehow choose you. Now suppose you had a weekly column read by tens of thousands of gamers. Would you make mention of said article in said magazine in your said column or should you stay silent out of a fear of seeming overly egotistical?

For the viewers at home, this is what I call a "no brainer." For you see, I already know I'm overly egotistical, and so do all my faithful readers. So really, what do I have to lose? Yes, in this month's *Inquest Gamer Magazine*, there's a six-page feature devoted to little old me. And I don't mean about my role as Head Designer (although it comes up a couple of times). This article is actually about *me*. You want to know how I ended up where I did, how I got there, and lots of little factoids and quotes from family and friends, then you might want to take a peek at the article. If such an idea sounds boring then by all means don't you dare buy or borrow a copy of *Inquest Gamer Magazine* #143.

Run, Mark Run

What does this have to do with **Magic** design? I'm getting there. The article delves into my past, and one of the pieces it turns up interested them enough that it got its own sidebar (that's what a little mini-article related to the main article that's stuck in a little box on the side or bottom of the page is called). You see, when I was first breaking into "the business," I started at the bottom rung of the ladder. The position is known as a "runner." Basically it boils down to this: in exchange for getting to work in Hollywood with some hope that maybe you can work your way up, you work insanely long hours for insanely little pay doing insanely hard work for some rather insane people with very insane expectations under somewhat insane working conditions.



I've heard several times that the experience is kind of like "rush week" of a fraternity. It is, except the "rush week" can last multiple years, there's no promise of you ever getting in the fraternity even if you do everything they say, and the "fraternity brothers" have a much bigger pocketbook and thus a lot more resources with which to mess with you. I spent two years as a runner and I have a number of pretty crazy stories. For those of you that remember my column [Cog Wild](#) during *Fifth Dawn* previews, I briefly touched on this aspect of my life and said one day I would share with you some of my "runner stories." Today is that day.

Here's how it's going to work. I'm going to tell three runner stories. Following each one, I'm going to tell a behind-the-scenes R&D story that I feel touches upon a similar vein. Let me preface all these stories (especially the runner ones) by saying that I swear on all that is holy that these stories actually happened. Some of them are going to sound crazy. Heck, some of them are crazy, but they're true.

The first story is called:

The Couch

One of the important things to understand about runners is that it's their job to do the things that are asked of them. Runners aren't supposed to question the tasks they are given. They aren't supposed to refuse them. And they aren't supposed to publicly complain about them. Why would any human submit to a job like this? Let's just say Hollywood has a strong allure. Why do I bring this up? Because at some point you're going to not understand why I didn't just quit. Just remember that I'm a stubborn man and I wanted to work in Hollywood.

Our story begins on a fine summer day on a studio lot in Hollywood. The television season begins in the fall but in order to get them done by then, the new season for the people behind the scenes begins in the summer (and often the spring for the writers). I was just hired to be a runner for a sitcom. I had spent the last few weeks getting everything ready for the start of filming. Today was the first day that the actors showed up.

A quick aside on actors. I've done a lot of acting myself over the years. I've commingled with actors from a young age. I have great respect for the craft. And yes, I did meet a number of actors in Hollywood who I respected greatly. That said, the majority of high profile actors I worked with during my six years in Hollywood are, what's the word - oh yes, crazy! I don't know how much fame or making huge amounts of money factor into the picture, but many of the big stars I worked for were not the picture of mental health.

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



Many were neurotic. A few were paranoid. And a number just didn't seem to have a firm grasp on reality. Finally, we get to the prima donnas. These were the actors who felt that their status meant they were better than everyone. Now, I'm egotistical, but I'm but a candle in the wind next to the bonfires of vanity that I'm talking about. Anyway, the show I was working on had such an actress - the kind who thought she was the star of the show when, in fact, she was at best a supporting player. She had a big chip on her shoulder. Runners have many predators. The crazed prima donna is one of the most threatening.



The studio I was working at had several shows in production, but a fellow runner (whom I'll call Gary) and I were assigned to one particular show. One day, the runner coordinator told Gary and I to go to the actors' dressing rooms. Outside the building, we found a rather large couch wrapped in plastic. Our coordinator informed us that the prima donna, who I'll call Darcy, wanted a new couch for her dressing room. The powers that be ordered one and had it delivered to the building. I'm not sure why the people who delivered the couch didn't take it up to the dressing room, but I'd guess it's because some higher-up at the studio just said, "Don't worry. We'll have some runners do it."

Before we could take up the new couch, we had to remove the one that was there. Why? The dressing room wasn't that big. Darcy, as I explained earlier, wasn't as important as she was in her own mind. I think getting a new couch was her little way of trying to prove that she could make demands. Anyway, Gary and I headed up to Darcy's dressing room. We politely knocked on the door and explained that we were there to take the couch. She made us wait about twenty minutes while she did who knows what, but finally she let us in.

The dressing room was small. The hall was skinny. And the stairs (did I mention Darcy's dressing room was on the second floor?) were ill-suited to moving large objects. But we knew the couch had gotten into the room so we felt pretty confident that it must also come out. It took us about an hour to free the old couch from the building. That's when we realized that the new couch was bigger than the old couch. Nonetheless, as I explained above, when the boss says jump, the runner asks how high. They wanted the couch in the dressing room; we were going to make it happen. An hour and a half later, we get the new couch into the dressing room.

Once we were done, Darcy was called to come take a look at it. She walked in, tilted her head and stared at the new couch. After about a minute, she turned to us and said, "Let me see the old one again."

There was no way in the world to bring the old couch back without first removing the new couch, so Gary and I took the new couch back outside and then brought the old couch back. Remember that each trip each way was an hour plus of physically exhausting grunt work. But we were runners so, of course, we do as we're told. Darcy was called back to the dressing room. Again she walked in, tilted her head, and stared for a minute. She turned to us and said, "Let me see the new one again."

Two hours or so later, the new one was back in the dressing room. Darcy returned. We saw her patented head tilt. She turned to us and said, "I don't like it."

And she walked out.

Gary and I then spent several more hours (we were starting to slow down, as we were exhausted) putting the first couch back. The day ended as Gary and I were resting on the new couch back outside. "You realize," I said, "that we've spent the entire day killing ourselves and everything is identical to how it was when we started this morning."

Gary smiled and said, "Welcome to being a runner."

All jobs have tasks thrust upon you. Card design is no different. My design story inspired by the couch story is one I call -



Synergy

We talk a lot about the separation of design and development. In fact, because R&D feels it's important to have development provide a fresh look, we have a rule that says that the lead designer of a set isn't allowed to serve on that set's development team. But that rule wasn't always in place. Back in the day, **Magic** R&D had five members (myself, Bill Rose, Mike Elliott, William Jockusch, and Henry Stern). As such, the five of us were on every development team. For me this included *Tempest*, which was the first set I'd ever lead design on.

I bring this up because I was a little more emotionally attached to *Tempest* than I was to the average set. I had put a lot of blood and sweat into *Tempest* and, as such, I was a bit possessive of the set. But I wasn't in charge. Henry was the lead developer. Anyway, development was going along pretty well. Design had stuffed the set to the gills with mechanics (I don't remember the exact number, but *Tempest* set the record for the set that saw the most cards from its design file end up in other sets) and the development team had taken a great deal of time plucking out the excess.

The set was getting to a happy place when one day Bill came to the meeting with an agenda. Brand had talked with Bill about a computer game that had licensed to use **Magic**. The computer game was going to come out

shortly after the release of *Tempest* and they wanted to make sure that there was some crossover between the expansion and the computer game. No problem, the development team said, we can send them a card file complete with copies of the art.

No, explained Bill, the game already has its creatures. Computer games take longer to create than **Magic** sets. They're not asking for us to put our creatures in their game but rather vice versa. We needed to find ways to stick their creatures in our set.

While this might not seem so bad you need to remember that *Tempest* was experimenting with the idea of building a giant story told through the card set, a little thing called the Weatherlight Saga. (Click [here](#) to see what I'm talking about.) This meant that fitting in extra cards had above normal complication.

Nonetheless we found places for most of the creatures, the majority of which didn't draw attention to themselves. The one stickler was the Bayou Dragonfly. Here's a [peek](#) in case you're not familiar.



The creature didn't seem particularly fantasy or even magical. We'd been moving green away from flying, but clearly this creature had wings. I argued my case many times to many different people. I argued that it would be okay if just some of the creatures showed up. The computer game wasn't going to make it or break it on the inclusion of a dragonfly. But in the end, Brand decided to play ball and told us to suck it up - which we did, but very begrudgingly on my behalf. And thus, *Tempest* has the first and last flying swampwalker.

The computer game never came out.

My next runner story is one of my favorites as it led me to do something I had never done before and never done since. I call the story -

The Delivery

Runners have many responsibilities. One of the most important was known around the office as "script duty." Before I explain what "script duty" is, let me fill you in on a few basic details about how sitcoms work. Most sitcoms are what is known as a "four-camera show." This means that it is filmed in front of a studio audience with four cameras that pick up all the action. While things get picked up that are flubbed, for the most part the actors perform the scenes straight through in order, much like a play. Most sitcoms film Friday night. This means that each weekday is spent fine tuning that week's script to get it as good as it can be by filming night.

Back to "script duty." During the day, the actors practice the current day's script and then perform it. The writers and producers (in television there is a huge overlap between these two categories) take notes, and then each afternoon and evening is spent fine tuning the script. The writers stay in the "writers' room" until the latest draft is finished. This often can go late into the night.

Once the writers are done, the production secretaries (also called the writer's assistants) type up the newest version of the script. Once they have a clean copy, it is passed on to the runner, who then has to make copies for everyone involved in the production. Most of the staff scripts are then dropped off in the office. But the actors need the scripts when they wake up (or before they go to bed if the scripts are done early enough), so before the runner can go home, he or she has to deliver all the actors' scripts. For the show in question this was quite the drive, as the actors lived nowhere near each other.



In addition, any guest actors who are on the show that week also need a script delivered. The runner quickly learns where the regulars live, but the guest stars are always a pain because they're an unknown quantity. On the day in question, the writers went late, late into the night, and yes, of course, there was a guest star that week. By the time I finished copying the scripts it was three in the morning. By the time I got to the guest star's apartment complex it was half past four.

The building had security, so I had to ring his apartment. There was no answer. He was obviously asleep, deep enough so that he didn't hear the buzzer. Here was the problem. The previous week I had been unable to deliver a script. I don't remember why, but it was another obstacle beyond my control. The end result of my not delivering the script was that the guest star complained and it worked its way down through the hierarchy until it got to me. I was told if it happened again I would be fired (this was a popular thing to say to runners - but that's really a whole other story for a different column).

Obviously, I didn't want to be fired. But the guest star wasn't waking up to let me in. Plus, it was four thirty in the morning so there wasn't exactly the option of getting help from someone else. So I did something I had never done before and haven't done since - I broke the law. How'd I deliver the script? I broke into the building. How? I scaled a fence.

As I was doing it, I understood the absurdity of the situation. Usually one is forced into crime by the lack of a job. I imagined getting caught and trying to explain to the police officer why I had to break into the building to do my job. In my imagination, it went like this:

Me: Hello, Officer.

Police Officer: You do understand that breaking and entering is a felony offense?

Me: I wasn't going to take anything. I'm leaving something.

Police Officer: What are you leaving?

Me: A sitcom script.

Police Officer: Did you write it?

Me: This piece of trash? Heavens no.

Police Officer: I'm going to have to take you in and book you.

Me: On the way in, could we swing by the Valley? I got one more delivery.

Police Officer: You're a runner?

Me: Yes.

Police Officer: Oh, that explains it. Never mind, you can go.

Me: Really?

Police Officer: With what you have to put up with? I don't envy you. I just have to fight felons armed with unregistered handguns. You have to answer to Hollywood producers. Good luck, kid.



While I've never broken the law while working in R&D, I have been privy to a little boundary pushing.

I call this next story -

The Push

The first expansion I worked on when I came to Wizards of the Coast was *Alliances*. The set was very important because Wizards had had some missteps over the previous year. *Fallen Empires* had been overprinted, *Homelands* was a big flop with the public, and over six months had gone by without a **Magic** expansion. For the first time, there was doubt about whether **Magic** would be able to recover. There were many who believed that **Magic's** future rested on the shoulders of *Alliances*.

Because of this, R&D put a lot of resources into *Alliances*. In fact, every member of R&D was on the development team, all thirteen of us. Luckily, the design team (the East Coast Playtesters, a.k.a. Skaff Elias, Jim Lin, Dave Petty, and Chris Page) were on top of their game and delivered a very interesting set chock full of innovation and cool cards. The set was a little unruly as so many ideas were packed into it, but R&D was able to wrestle the set to a good place.

In fact, R&D was in very high spirits, because we knew we had a hit on our hands. Unfortunately, it turned out that only R&D held this belief. One of the customer service reps had looked *Alliances* and sent the president a scathing review of the set. Other customer service members backed up the letter, and pretty soon there was talk in the building that perhaps *Alliances* was a dud. This, of course, was killing R&D, because we knew we had the goods. *Alliances* was a strong set.

Then came word that **Magic** Brand was nervous. They decided to cut back on the print run. All of R&D was frustrated. Shorting the print run not only meant less money for the company, but we were worried that it might be read by the distributors as a sign of weakness in the brand. Something had to be done.



That's when Skaff came up with a brilliant plan. He went to each R&D member and asked if they had faith in *Alliances*. We all did. He asked us if we would put our money where our mouth was. We uniformly said yes. He then went to the Brand manager and made the following offer. R&D was willing to pay for the extra printing. We

only asked for fifty percent of the profit generated by the portion we funded. We would take all the risk, and Wizards would even make half the money if the set was successful.

The Brand manager understood that R&D was smart. We weren't going to put that much money on the line unless we were pretty certain that we'd recoup the money. R&D was saying in the strongest way possible that we had faith in the set. That was good enough for the Brand manager. He returned the print levels back to the original numbers.

Alliances, of course, went on to be the best-selling set at the time and a huge critical success. To this day, I still wonder what I would have done with my share of the money.

From one success to another. Here's my next runner story. Once again, I have to stress that what you're about to read actually happened. I swear. I call the story -

The Swordfish

So I was working on the Emmys (for my non-American audience, it's the award show for American television). We were in Pasadena, California at the site of the award show. It was the first day we were there. In fact, it was the first time I was ever in Pasadena. It was about noon when I got a page on my beeper (this was pre-cell phones) with a numeric code telling me to report to the director's truck. (Not to bog this story down with facts about how productions work, but when you are away from a studio, the director's area is usually housed inside a big truck.)

As soon as arrived, the assistant to the director approached me and said the following line:

We got twenty 'til lunch; get me a swordfish.

Now for those not fluent in runner-ese, let me translate for you. Here's what she was saying:

Hello, Mark. How are you doing? I'm so glad you got my page and were able to make it here so quickly. Here's the deal. Based on how the run-through is going it appears as if the lunch break will begin in twenty minutes. The director is hungry, and as he is the head honcho and gets to ask for anything regardless of how crazy it might sound, he has chosen to have swordfish for lunch. The reason I'm telling you right now is that he just a moment ago decided that this is what he wants. I need you in the next twenty minutes to obtain a cooked swordfish and bring it here to the director's truck. If you somehow fail to do this, I will, of course, make your life a living hell. Thank you very much.

The reason I left this story for last is that, one, it demonstrates how crazy a runner's life can be and two, as you will see, it was my shining moment of runner-dom. Okay, let's recap. I have just discovered that I have exactly twenty minutes to obtain a cooked swordfish. I have never been to Pasadena before. I don't know any of the restaurants, let alone one that serves swordfish. On top of that, while I'm not all that experienced in the art of cooking seafood, I'm pretty sure it probably takes more than twenty minutes to cook a swordfish.

Most people when put in a situation like this might have just quit then and there. But not me. Oh no, I thrive on challenges. It's why I spent many of my college hours doing improvisational comedy. It's why I do things like the [first](#) and [second](#) Topical Blend columns (and yes, I'm going to do another one within the next few months). And it's why I love designing **Magic** cards/sets/blocks. So hold onto your hats - here we go.



Twenty minutes to go. I quickly rush out to the street nearest the director truck. I scan the buildings and find the nicest restaurant I can. I enter it and find the maitre de. I inform him that I am looking for a nearby restaurant that serves swordfish. The nicer the restaurant the better. (As this is Hollywood, and I'm getting something for a person of importance, money really isn't an issue.) The best seafood restaurant is several miles away. I explain that it has to be somewhere I can walk. The best within walking distance is four blocks over.

Fifteen minutes to go. I'm running full speed down the street. I have directions, but between my adrenalin rush and my complete lack of familiarity with Pasadena, I get a little lost. Luckily I find a kind pedestrian who happens to know of the restaurant I'm looking for.

Eleven minutes to go. I'm at the restaurant. I spend thirty seconds calming down as my heart is racing. I've learned from experience that people respond better to calm people (which anyone who knows me will find quite humorous). I walk in the restaurant and find the maitre de. I ask her if they serve swordfish. Yes, they do. How long does it take to prepare? Twenty-five minutes. I look around the restaurant. It is somewhat crowded. I ask if the kitchen is currently preparing a swordfish. Has someone in the restaurant ordered one recently? She checks. Yes, one is being prepared.

Eight minutes to go. What would I need to do to get the swordfish being prepared? I would need to get permission of the man who ordered it. The maitre de points him out. I approach the man. I ask him and the lady he is eating with if I could have a moment of their time. I explain the insane circumstances to my quest. I tell him that if he would be so kind to let me have his swordfish and wait for a new one to be prepared, I would pick up the tab for their whole meal. I'm not sure if it's my charm or just the fact that everyone likes a free lunch, but they take me up on my offer.

Five minutes to go. While paying for the swordfish and the other man's meal, I have the restaurant pack the swordfish to go. A moment later I am out the door.

Three minutes to go. If I made it sound like when running to the restaurant I was running as fast as I was able, I was. Well, at least I thought I was at the time. It turned out that I could run even faster.

Zero minutes to go. I knock on the director's truck. The assistant opens the door. I show her my watch and hand her the swordfish. "Here you go," I say.

Her look was priceless because, you see, she did what all assistants do. She had worked in some wiggle time. She never thought I could get a swordfish in twenty minutes. (And for the record neither did I before I actually did it.) She needed it in forty minutes. Telling me twenty was just a way to make sure I hurried. I was relatively new to the running business at the time (the Emmys were my third job in just a few months), so I hadn't realized that I really had more time than I was given. If I hadn't been so out of breath and on the verge of passing out, I might have laughed much harder than I did. That look, though, was priceless.



So what design story does this remind me of? Design, much like running, requires a bit of ingenuity in the face of crisis. My design story has me tackling a different, but also tricky task. I call the story -

The Linchpin

I often talk about how far Design has come over the years. What I don't often talk about is how far both Development and Creative have come. This story will shine a little light on the latter. This story takes place during the tail end of *Odyssey* development. The set had a lot of good art and a lot of good cards. The problem was that the two didn't really line up. Due to a number of factors that I won't get into, the set was full of cards whose art didn't really match up with their mechanics. For example, look at this piece of art:



Art by Ron Spencer

You might know it from the *Odyssey* card [Flame Burst](#) (click the link if the card's unfamiliar). The art was turned in for [Aven Smokeweaver](#), a creature with protection from red. The artist was trying to show how the creature was immune to fire. The problem was that without further context, it seemed like it was being hurt by the fire rather than resisting it.

Luckily we had a solution to our problem. It was something we had done a few times in **Magic's** past. (Although for the record I should stress that Creative has advanced so much over the years that we would never dream of doing something like this now.) We laid out all of the art turned in for the set. We then got the card file. We went card by card figuring out what art could work for each card. Mega-swaps like this get tricky because cards that were turned in for one thing (like a white creature) could end up on completely different cards (like a red direct damage spell). If we weren't careful we could end up with three leftover art pieces that only could work on green creatures and end up with a blue instant, a black enchantment, and a land.

Luckily we had done this before, so we had learned a number of tricks. One such trick was to hold back on the amorphous art pieces. Usually in any set there are a few pieces that are not so literal in their representation. These pieces were invaluable in a mega-swap because they had the ability to fit a larger percentage of cards. Anyway, mega-swaps usually end with you putting one of the amorphous paintings with whatever card is leftover. Here was the two pieces we ended up with. First the art:



Art by Darrell Riche

As you can see, this piece is pretty figurative. There was some sort of fire with faces peeking out of the smoke. The tents in the background belonged to the human nomad mystics, making this a white card. Here was the text of the white card that was left over:

Target player can't play creature spells this turn.

Draw a card.

The mechanic ended up the final leftover because its effect was hard to pin down visually. What exactly does a spell that stops creature spells look like? The art was vague. It had faces in the smoke. Creatures have faces. As the joke goes, we figured we could fix it in name and flavor text.

It turns out that I was the person in charge of names and flavor text for *Odyssey*. (We were in between teams at the time, and I was the one person in R&D who had actually run names and flavor text teams before.) I knew we could write some flavor text to help, but the real problem was that the art and mechanic didn't seem to mesh. Both were vague enough that they didn't contradict the other, but there was something missing that tied them together. That something was a name.

You see, here's a little tip from card naming. If the name matches the art and the name matches the mechanic, you can get away with the art and mechanic being less connected. All I needed was a name that fit both halves. Oh yes, and due to our schedule, I had a full two days to find it.

Other people might have panicked at this point, but once you've acquired a cooked swordfish in twenty minutes there really isn't anything that can convince you something can't be done. (My general attitude, by the way, is that if you believe you can solve a problem, you can.) So I studied the picture and wrote down every name I could think of that made sense with it. Because of the fire and smoke, I had a lot of names that played around with "fire" and "smoke." Then I looked at the mechanic and tried to get all the names I could that fit the mechanic. Because it stopped creatures from being played I explored a lot of words and expressions that talked about stopping things.



Before I knew it, it was the day that the name was due. I was busy trying a naming trick where I looked up a word in the thesaurus and then kept looking up other words under the same listing. Somehow I got into words that meant "peace."

Under "peace" I found "cease-fire." My eye was drawn right to it because I was already sensitive to the word "fire." The word was perfect. For the art it played into the fire imagery. For the mechanic it represented stopping. I had my solution. All that was left was to get some flavor text that sewed it all together:

When the crimson fades from the magical embers, a final wisp of smoke will rise. Soon after, hostilities will begin anew.

And I had my card. Admittedly no twenty-minute swordfish, but I was happy to find a workable solution on a problem that seemed at first to be unsolvable.

Tail of the Tales

That's all I got for you today. If you liked today's column (or if you didn't) and want to hear more "runner stories" in the future (or don't want to), please let me know.

Join me next week when I look at a new twist to an old friend.
Join me next week when I look at a new twist to an old friend.

Until then, may you be able to see the humor in the pain of your past.

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](#)

