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Signed, Sealed, and Delivered

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 Making Magic
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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Welcome to Sealed Deck Week! This week we'll be examining an age-old format that actually has a much greater impact on design than one might think at first blush. Originally when I heard it was Sealed Deck Week, I was planning to write about how Sealed (and other Limited play) influences how we design cards. But something funny happened along the way.

When I sit down at my keyboard to write a column, I have a general idea of the gist of what I'm going to say. I usually have a rough outline in my head, but part of the fun of writing is diving in and seeing what happens along the way. Before I began writing about the impact Sealed has on design, I thought it might be interesting to explore why Sealed exists at all as a format. The designer in me is quite fascinated by how things come to be and so I thought I'd spend a few paragraphs examining how I believe Sealed (and Limited play in general) came to be.



While it might seem like I've been connected to **Magic** forever, I wasn't actually around in the early days. So I decided to use what knowledge I've gleaned from some conversations with Richard and some of the playtesters from the early days, mix that with my knowledge of **Magic** design, and extrapolate how I believe Sealed came to be. Anyway, this was supposed to be a few paragraphs. Turns out that once I dived in, the topic really began snowballing (wait, did I just mix metaphors?).

What this means is that I'll be spending today's column examining why and how Sealed came to be. How Sealed affects **Magic** design is a fine topic and something I will eventually dedicate a column to. But not today.

In The Beginning

As a creator, I am most amazed by what I call the "dirt-obvious" design. That is, designs that seem so straightforward and so clearly the obvious thing to do that someone must have already done it except no one did. This happens occasionally in card design when you create a card so elegantly simple that you're sure that it must have already been printed, but it hasn't been. I feel so awesome when I create a "dirt-obvious" card, or heavens forbid, a mechanic (although in eleven years, hybrid's probably the only thing I've ever done that qualifies).

I bring this up because I believe Sealed Deck is an example of "dirt-obvious" design. Now that it exists it seems like an obvious place for the game to be in, yet if it wasn't there I don't believe many people would notice its absence. Seriously, try to imagine for a moment a world without Sealed (or any Limited) formats. What about how the game plays would ever lead a person to come up with the idea of Limited play? The basic structure of the game begs Constructed. But Limited? Not really.

In fact, Wizards of the Coast had to spend a great deal of time and energy in the early days to encourage Limited play. Many players in the early days felt it flew in the face of what the game was all about. And to be fair, early **Magic** product wasn't particularly designed with Limited play in mind. So how exactly did Limited play come about?

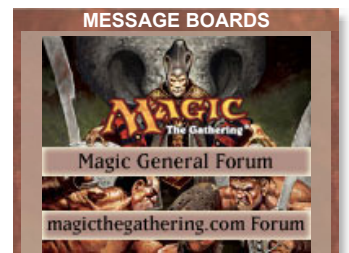
What follows is my hypothesis.

Starting From Scratch

To the best of my knowledge, the idea of Sealed came from the same place that most genius ideas associated with **Magic** come from—the brain of Richard Garfield. Piecing everything together, this is how I believe sealed came to be.

To begin, I think we have to go back to the game's beginning. No, not the release of the game, that's much later in the process. I'm talking about going back to the early playtests when **Magic** was just finding its legs. To understand early **Magic**, you have to understand Richard Garfield. One of Richard's defining traits is that he is a lover of games. He started designing not because he saw a career in it but rather out of a true love of the craft. Part of being a good game designer is understanding what other game designers have done and examining what has and hasn't worked. The original inspiration for **Magic** was the idea of building a game that was bigger than the box. What does that expression mean? I've used it on occasion, and many of the interviews by Richard early in the game's life used the phrase.

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To understand "bigger than the box," let's look at other games. We'll begin with Monopoly. When you sit down to play, the game is pretty much spelled out for you. The forty spaces on the board are the exact same forty from each other time you played. The Chance and Community Chest cards never vary. Sure there is randomness in what order things might happen but nothing that isn't in the defined parts of the game will ever show up and surprise anyone. The pieces from the first time you play will be identical with those of the last you ever play. (though the pieces you move around the board might vary by one or two.)

But this trend isn't true of every game. Let's turn our attention to a game called Cosmic Encounter. If you've never heard of the game, by the way, I strongly urge you to track down a copy. There is probably no game in existence that had a bigger influence in the creation of **Magic**. Cosmic Encounter is the pinnacle "game that breaks its own rules." Anyway, Cosmic Encounter had a base set. (Note that there have been numerous incarnations of the game so I'm talking in general terms.) Like Monopoly, it was a closed system of pieces. But what made Cosmic Encounter different was that there were numerous expansions that allowed you to add on to the base game experience.



Next let's examine **Dungeons & Dragons**. The pre-eminent role-playing game, D&D gave players tools with which to design their own games. Sure, players could buy prepackaged modules but even then they were using them with homemade characters ensuring that their experience with the game was always going to be a unique one.

I believe when Richard created **Magic** that he was taking elements of all of the above. He wanted a game that had definitive pieces such as Monopoly, had the expandability of game play like Cosmic Encounter, but allowed players to handcraft their own experience like **Dungeons & Dragons**. Okay, great, interesting stuff. What does this have to do with Sealed Deck? I'm getting there. I'm getting there.

This Is Only a Playtest

Richard began the earliest **Magic** playtests by giving each player a small number of cards, reflecting what it would be like to open a few booster packs. He felt it was important to capture the essence of what they felt the average player would be like. Note that in the early assumptions about the game they assumed that the average player would have a lot less fewer cards. They assumed players would spend under one hundred dollars on the game—total. They had no way of predicting where **Magic** was actually headed because to do that they would have had to assume that the game would totally reinvent the gaming world.

Anyway, making the playtesters use small amounts of cards for play proved to be a wise move. In very little time, players started hoarding their little square piece of cardboard (and I'm not using poetic imagery here; the first playtest cards really were little pieces of cardboard—one inch by an inch and a half). As Richard watched how the playtesters responded to the low-quality playtest cards he got the first inkling that he was tapping into something big.

Here was the problem though. The initial rush of building something from nothing was a one-time thing. Once players had cards, they wouldn't ever be able to experience the first time rush again. Yes, they would be able to experience new cards but it would always be in the context of how the new cards interacted with the old ones. It would be additive. Change could only come from new things entering the system. Richard realized that this was a problem that had to be solved.

It turns out that the key to solving this problem was finding ways to remove cards from the system. **Magic** has come up with two excellent solutions to this problem. The first solution is the idea of formats. That is, create ways to establish play that purposefully and on schedule exclude cards by quite literally forcing them to leave the system. While this is an excellent innovation, it wouldn't come along until later in **Magic's** existence. The other solution is Limited play. How do you recapture the first moment of discovering cards? Just force players to start over. Create ways to play that make players begin anew.

Richard understood this very early in **Magic's** design. Built into the playtests were two innovations. One, the playtests all had a built in duration. Each new playtest would force the players to start anew. Two, Richard built league play into the playtests. In a league, players receive a set amount of sealed product. Players then create decks by building them from their limited card pool. Each new league would begin with a new set of cards. The important point here is that the initial playtests of **Magic** had Sealed components built into the system.

But that still doesn't answer the question of why Richard felt the need to have Sealed aspects in the first place. How did he arrive at the "dirt-obvious" answer?

It Happens

My best guess is that the discovery of Sealed happened by accident. Please be aware that I'm not dissing Richard. Penicillin, chocolate chip cookies, the Post-It Note... Lots of great things happen by accident. The greatness in each of these circumstances is that someone realized the good idea when they saw it in action.

So how did Sealed come about? My guess is because Richard wanted to playtest his cards. Let me explain. Part of designing a new set is playtesting. There's only so much you can learn by looking at a card file. Eventually, if you want to see how the cards play, you just have to play them. One of the lessons I learned long ago is that

when you want to playtest new cards, the best thing to do in the early design playtesting is to only play with the new cards. Yes, eventually you mix them in with other cards. But in the earliest hand-on playtests, you tend to limit yourself to the new cards.

Why? First, it guarantees that you play with the cards you want to see. I've had many a playtest where I want to test out a new card only to have it not show up game after game after game. Second, you tend to heighten synergy as cards within the same system often hit the same themes. This helps you get a better sense of the environment often finding elements it might have taken much longer to notice. Third, it better shows up any deficiencies in your environment. If your new set of cards is missing something, the void is much more apparent when there are no other cards helping it hide.

I think the first Sealed Deck came about when Richard first started playtesting his cards. Design forced him to create Sealed-style environments and Richard, being the bright guy he is, caught on to how he was enjoying it.

In doing research for this article I did call Richard up and ask him how he felt he came up with the idea of Limited. He admitted that it was a hard thing to pin down as it just "kind of happened." Richard felt that the first formal Sealed Deck spontaneously happened when the first product arrived. They were eager to play and it was just easier to rip open packs and play with them than take the time to find cards and build decks.

In fact, Richard played with what he called "One Deck" where he would open a single starter deck (as they were known before they morphed into tournament packs) and started gunslinging against people for ante. Eventually other people would open their own "One Deck" and the closest thing to Sealed was first played.

When I brought up the leagues he agreed that they did essentially function like Sealed Deck games, especially as they invoked a no-trading rule to make people play with what they opened. Richard also said that he would just grab groups of the latest cards for playtesting, which supports my hypothesis of Sealed coming directly out of design playtesting.

Sealed with a Kiss

Which brings us to the final interesting study about the Sealed Deck format. What about it drives players to play it? What does Sealed as a format have to offer? Let's take a look. While this is not a complete list, it is a look at the major reasons why people enjoy playing Sealed.

#1 – Sealed Allows You to Experience the Early Adrenaline Rush. I talked about this earlier but I feel I would be amiss not to list it. I've talked before about the Crispy Hashbrown Effect in **Magic**. (You can read my column [The Answer Lies Within](#) if you have no idea what I'm talking about.) The early moments of discovery are an intoxicating time in any game. Sealed is a way to bring this aspect to the game each and every time you play.



#2 – Sealed Lets You Use Cards You Might Otherwise Never Use. As I've also talked about many times before, tournament constructed uses a tiny percentage of the cards. Even if you constantly change decks and always get creative with your sideboards you're just not going to get a chance to play with most of the cards. Sealed changes this in two ways. First it forces random cards into your hands and second it lowers the power level enough that many of those cards start being playable.

#3 – Sealed Adds More Variety. One of the interesting statistics is that the longer you stay in **Magic** the more (statistically speaking, of course) Limited you play. Why? Because it creates a greater variance in play, i.e., the games are less like one another. One of the things that draws players to **Magic** is how varied the games can be. As players evolve they seek out formats that create greater and greater variety. Plus...

#4 – Sealed Takes Zero Preparation Time. Another thing that happens over time as players age is that they have less and less available time. Single life turns into married life and then family life. One of the most powerful things about Sealed is that you can just show up and play without needing any prep. Sure, you could study the limited environment but if you do you will tend to gravitate towards drafting more than sealed.

#5 – Sealed Is a Test of a Fun Set of Skills – Yet one more big draw is that sealed, and limited formats in general, test very different skills from Constructed play. Instead of understanding match-ups and environment and metagame, the sealed format is about learning how to adapt with what you have. It tests your ability to gauge the game on the fly as you are constantly faced with situations that you couldn't have prepared for.

#6 – Sealed Lets You Experience the Purity of an Environment. I talk all the time about block design. You want to really experience what a block has to offer? Try Sealed. In no format is the change more noticeable than the one that throws you in the middle of the new environment with no tie to what has come before.

#7 – Sealed Lets You Sample an Environment. Curious what a new set has to offer? With the possible exception of preconstructed decks, there is no simpler way to jump in and see what the newest set is up to. This is why Sealed is popular with new players as well as with people who have dropped out of the game and are curious to take a peak at where the game has evolved.

Sealed For Your Protection

And that is the why and how of the Sealed format. I hope today's column provided some insight and as always I'm interested to hear your feedback either in the column's thread or in my email (which, as always, I will read).

Join me next week when I explain how it takes two to tango.

Until then, may you know the joy of "cracking a pack."

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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