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# Everything Old Is New Again

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Making Magic  
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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Welcome to Old Favorites Week! This week we'll be exploring **Magic's** tendency to bring back popular things from the past be they cards, mechanics, themes, etc. As "Making **Magic**" is the design column, I'm going to be exploring why design chooses to use something old rather than make something new.

But before I get to that juicy topic let me make a quick aside. [Last week](#) my teaser for this week was: "Join me next week when the onslaught begins." What in the world does that have to do with old favorites? Nothing. But as I like to give you behind-the-scenes glimpses, I thought I'd show you what happened.

So, I write my column late night at home. Often when I get to the teaser line I forget what the next week's column is because usually it's pretty late and I'm tired. Last week, for instance, I knew that this week was either Old Favorites Week or another theme week. I wrote the following in my column:

Join me next week when the onslaught begins.

Join me next when I return to well, talk about returning.

**[KELLY: PLUG IN THE RIGHT WEEK. CALL ME ON MY CELL IF IT'S NEITHER OF THESE TWO AND I'LL WHIP UP A TAG LINE]**

Kelly, unfortunately, was busy in Baltimore covering U.S. Nationals and forgot himself what week it was. Thus, my tag line was listed for the wrong week. I know readers often wonder why mistakes like this pop up and the answer is we're only human. We make mistakes. Not really relevant to anything else in today's column but I like to be a straight-forward as I can with all of you, so I figured what's a long aside between friends?

## Something Old, Something New

The center of today's topic is an age-old design dilemma. **Magic** is currently in its fourteenth year. We make three to four sets a year. That's a lot of cards. And it's a lot of ideas. What this means is that often when you approach a problem you discover that you've visited the same problem in the past. When you do, you are always tempted to see what choices you made last time. Which, of course, brings up the idea of reusing what you did before rather than coming up with something new.



Today, I'd thought I'd look at the pros and cons of reusing old ideas and then give a few tips on how exactly R&D decides to choose old over new. We'll begin with the pros:

### Pro #1 – Old Things Are a Known Quantity

To explain this pro I want to start by talking a little bit about advertising. Have you ever taken a moment to think about why companies advertise? What exactly makes advertising worth the time and money? There are a number of benefits advertising provides but the greatest of them all is something known as product recognition. Product recognition in the simplest terms is an understanding by the consumer of what your product is. A Mac is a computer. Reeboks are shoes. **Magic** is a trading card game.

Why is product recognition so important? Because of how the brain works. Okay, imagine you're in a grocery store and you want a jar of pickles. You don't normally eat pickles but for some reason you have a craving (not a "pregnant woman wanting odd things" craving but rather a "pickles are pretty good and man you haven't had a pickle in a while" craving.) What do you do? You walk down the pickle aisle. Assuming there are no other dominating factors (such as you're low on cash and are looking for the cheapest jar), you will pick up the pickle jar whose name you best recognize.

Why do you do that? Because people are egocentric. I don't mean that in a bad way. My ego is as centric as they come. My point is that people assume things they know are important. If you recognize the name on a jar of pickles then that brand must be of value because after all you remembered it. The mere fact that you know it lends it credence. Which leads to the belief that the things you know are the best. Never heard of a brand? It must be of low quality. The brand that you know really well—that's the good one. This might sound a little nutty at first blush, by I swear this is how the brain works. People equate knowledge with quality.

What does this Advertising 101 lecture have to do with reusing old cards? Everything. (Aren't you paying attention?) People put value in things they know. One of the reason to bring back old things is that the audience is

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already familiar with them and thus can hit the ground running when they see them. (I would say it goes without saying, but as I'm about to say it I guess it goes with saying—the only things we consider bringing back are the successes; if the audience didn't like something the first time we are heavily influenced to not bring it back.) Yes, new cards are exciting, but they don't have the built-up equity that classic cards from the past have.

### Pro #2 – Nostalgia Is A Powerful Tool

During my time in Hollywood as a runner (a.k.a. low-paid slave—see my [Tales of a Runner](#) column for more of this phase of my life) I had the opportunity to work on show called "Fifty Years In Television." It's what's known in the biz as a "clip show," that is, the entire show is just a collection of clips from television's past (okay with newly filmed intros by various stars. This is the show, by the way, where I got to meet my idol Jim Henson—I'm sure one day I'll do a "brush with greatness" column and tell you about the different stars I've met). Why does Hollywood do clip shows? One, they're dirt cheap. And two, the one that's a little closer to our topic of the week, people have a strong affinity for things from their past.

Why? Because people see the world through their own lenses. A certain song might be the one you had heard on the radio as you were driving home from your driving test with your brand new license. A certain movie might have been where you went on your first date with your significant other. A certain television show might have been the one you watched when you were coping with the death of a loved one. The point is that people tend to associate their life with things that they experienced during that time. I often get letters from people, as an example, who talk about what **Magic** meant to them because it was introduced at a certain time in their life.

My point is that a new card has the ability to create new memories, but an old one comes with ones already built in. This is why nostalgia is such a potent force (and why we messed around with it in the *Time Spiral* block). It builds on top of a wellspring of emotions that pre-exist. If every other medium on the face of the planet can harness this powerful force, why not **Magic**?

### Pro #3 – You Don't Have To Reinvent the Wheel

I've talked often (such as [last week](#), for instance) about how **Magic** design requires a lot of problem solving. So when designers come across a problem that we've already solved the following thought does cross our mind: we already solved it! Yes, we are gluttons for punishment and a wee bit stubborn, so we do try to find other answers. But in the end, it's important for us to remember that one of the viable answers is to use the known solution.



### Pro #4 – Magic Design Is a Finite Resource

When we first announced *Ravnica's* multicolor theme, there were a number of posters that complained that we were reusing a theme that we had already used, successfully no less. Couldn't we explore more virgin design space? My answer to that is: How much virgin design space do you think there is? Yes, there are areas to explore that we haven't yet but in fourteen years we've mined a good deal of the space available for block themes.

And you know what? There's not that many. **Magic** does not have the luxury of taking a theme as rich as multicolor and throwing it away after one use. Multicolor, graveyard, tribal, artifacts—these are themes you're going to see again. Not necessarily done exactly as they were done before, but these are rich design areas that have lots of potential.

Sure, block themes are a rare commodity but this problem can't affect cards. There are an infinite number of card ideas. Yes and no. There are lots of complex ideas, but when you start looking at simple cards, the design space shrinks quickly. For example, there are only so many simple direct damage spells you can do. That's why we're constantly hooking up direct damage with the mechanic of the block. Deal 1 to a creature or player? Done. Deal 2 to a creature or player? Done. Deal 3? 4? 5? Done, done, done. Just players? Done. Just creatures? Done. All creatures? Done. Can't regenerate? Can't be prevented? Can't be countered? There's variations on the theme but in the end, the space is not as open and free as you might think at first glance.

One of the most common reasons to reuse something from the past is that it does what you want as simply and aesthetically as possible.

Those are the pros. Let's take a look at the cons:

### Con #1 – It's Just Not New

I often talk about the qualities of the game that drive it. One of the most important qualities is that the game keeps reinventing itself. The designers keep finding ways to take lots of known quantities and find elements of the unknown to attach to them. In my mind, the biggest strike against old cards is that they aren't new. This, for instance, was one of the largest issues players had with *Planar Chaos*. Because most of the cards were merely a shift in color, some players were disappointed by the lack of the new. (More on this next week, by the way, as it's time for the State of **Magic** column.)

This is probably the biggest strike against the old. The desire for the new.

### Con #2 – The Old Way Is Often Outdated

Last month I was thinking about all the writing I've done for **Magic** when I did the math and realized that I've written over one million words about **Magic**. This realization stunned me. Most people in their lives never write a million words about anything. I'm not sure what percentage of people even write a million words total in their lives.

Why do I bring this up? Because once I realized how much I've written I went back and looked at some of my earlier writings. There were some gems, but much of my earlier writing is a bit cringe-worthy. It's not that it was bad for its time; it's just that I've grown as a writer and when I look back I can see all sorts of mistakes that I made simply because I didn't know any better at the time.

This is another problem with looking back at the past. That's where it lives—the past. Yes, some ideas can transcend time, but most show their age. So when you go back to retrieve things from the past you have the danger of finding things that simply don't work (or might not work as well) in the present day.

In fact, our Oracle database encounters this problem every day because it has to modernize cards and mechanics that were created in a different time. Often what was done then doesn't even work now. I don't know how many times I've heard Mark Gottlieb gripe because some card that was made to do something that made sense in the past simply doesn't make any sense in modern day.



A famous recent example would be the card Master of Arms. The card was designed at a time when tapping a blocking creature kept it from dealing damage. Then *Sixth Edition* rules came along and removed the rule and all of a sudden Master of Arms's mechanic made a lot less sense.

### Con #3 – Old Cards Can Cause Problems with Flavor

Sometimes when we reprint a card, we'll give it a new name and card concept. Why do we do this? Because changing the name and card concept allows the Creative team to help imbue the card with flavor. In fact, one of the biggest stumbling blocks to bringing back old cards is that they make no sense in the Creative.

For example, when we took the painlands out of *Eighth Edition* we contemplated the idea of putting them into *Ravnica*. Here was the problem. Names like "Karplusan" or "Koilos" can't just be plunked down anywhere. Yes, the mechanic for the lands was acceptable, but the names simply weren't. This is often the case with older cards. Each was designed to fill its initial role, but as that role changed, elements of the card became dated. Starting fresh though allows the Creative team members a chance to reinterpret the cards and thus make them more suitable for the modern day.

### Con #4 – Old Cards Stand In the Way of New Innovations

The last strike against reusing old cards is that they become an easy crutch to keep designers from being forced to explore new territories. Why? Because finding innovation is hard work. It's very frustrating. Having the "easy out" of reusing work from the past is a very tempting alternative to slogging it out in the trenches.

There is a documentary called *Comedian* which (well, half of it anyway) followed around Jerry Seinfeld as he returned to stand-up comedy without the use of any of his old material. The idea behind it was that Jerry knew if he had his old material to fall back on that he wouldn't be able to push himself as an artist, but by taking it away it forced him to have to find new areas to explore. Jerry was on to something.

On most designs, I start by giving myself and my team some parameters to help force the team to look in new directions. During *Ravnica* design, for instance, I stressed that our goal was to not be *Invasion*. As such, we took steps to avoid numerous things that *Invasion* did. In my opinion, *Ravnica* was greatly improved because of this approach.

## Make New Cards But Keep the Old

I've carefully explained why we both have to make use of the valuable resource of old cards / mechanics / themes and why we're fools to ever touch them. What does this mean? It means that design, as with many things, has a juggling act to work with. There is value to older items. Never using them would be a mistake. At the same time, over-reliance on old material is also a mistake. The goal is to find the right balance.

How do we do that? I'm glad you asked:

### #1 – Be Picky When and Where You Use Old Material

The metaphor I'll use is that of spices. Used properly, spices can add great value to a dish. Overused, they can ruin it. Old material works best in small portions. (And yes, there are exceptions such as the bonus sheet—but then **Magic** design is all about exceptions.) This means that the designers have to be frugal with its usage. Choose times when bringing back the old item will add value to the set rather than distract for little gain.



## #2 – Show the Old Material in a New Light

If you choose to bring something back, make sure that you are also adding elements to the set that allow the players to look at the old thing in a new light. For instance, we purposefully brought back **Shatter** and **Terror** in *Mirrodin* because we knew that each one would function very different in this environment than it had in any previous environment.

## #3 – Give the Old Material New Support

One of the ways to make something old feel new is to reprint it alongside cards that give the old cards new purposes. When we brought back cycling in *Onslaught*, for example, we introduced new elements (such as cards that triggered when things were cycled or that had an additional ability when cycled). This allowed us to revisit cycling without merely repeating the past.

## #4 – Reinterpret

A strict repeat is not new but a new take on an old classic can be. Bringing back a mechanic with new twists can give it a fresh feel. *Ravnica* can take *Invasion*'s theme and find new ways to approach it. One of the best ways to use the past is to borrow pieces of it that you then imbue with new ideas.

## #5 – Extrapolate / Expand

From time to time, ideas are brought back not because we want to show them off but because we want them to be a stepping off point. The best example of this is when we bring back a single card that we then build an entire cycle around it. *Gravedigger*, *Lobotomy*, *Kindle*, *Atog*... these cards all came back and spawned new cards that followed in their footsteps.

## The Common Old

Like many other things in design, old favorites are a resource. Used properly they can enhance your set and add layers that would not be possible without them. Used incorrectly, they can detract and pull focus. The trick is finding how to pull off the former without dipping into the latter.

That's all I got for this week. Join me next week when I dust off my podium and deliver my annual State of **Magic** speech.

Until then, may you use the past to build the future.

Mark Rosewater

## It's Time

Before I let you go for today, I need one last moment of your time. I said earlier this year that I was going to do my third Topical Blend this summer. For those of you that don't know what I'm talking about, go check out [Topical Blend #1](#) and [Topical Blend #2](#). In a nutshell, I allow all of you to pick two topics for me, one **Magic** and one non-**Magic**, and I will write an article that blends them together.

To do this, I need a list of topics (both **Magic** and non-**Magic** obviously). I've decided not to relist old topics from previous Topical Blends so if there's some idea from before that you want to see listed, I urge you to send it in again. On top of that, let's get some new topics to add into the mix. Once you all do that, I'll set up the two votes and before you know it you'll be reading Topical Blend #3.

Sound good? Okay, here's what you need to do. Send me an email (one is preferable to more than one) at the link below with all of your topics. Label the email "**Topical Blend #3 Topics**" and separate the topics into "**Magic**" and "**Non-Magic**." I'm excited to see what you all come up with. See you next week.

*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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