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State of Design 2007

Mark Rosewater
Making Magic
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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Woohoo, I'm in the big box! Hi mom. Wondering where the feature article is for today? Have no fear. It'll be here on Thursday bigger and better than ever. I wouldn't miss it, as we're showing off something that in my college town (that would be Boston for those that don't remember minutia like that) we'd refer to as "wicked awesome." But that's Thursday. Let's focus on today.

When I became Head Designer I started a tradition of writing a column each year dedicated to talking about where I see the current design of the game and discussing what plan I have for the future. For the non-American readers, this idea is based on a yearly speech the U.S. President makes called the State of the Union address. This is my third State of Design column. The [first one](#) was right before *Ravnica* block, and [the second](#) was last year just before *Time Spiral* block. As *Lorwyn* Block (and "Jelly" Block) is on the horizon, I felt it was time to drag out my podium and write my yearly column.

Let me start by asking my traditional question: **Magic** design, how is it going? In general, I'm pretty happy with how design is going, but this last year had a lot more lessons in it than the previous year. Later in the column I'm going to walk through what I believe those lessons were. But first, let me examine my goals for last year.

#1 – Continue with Goals from Last Year (a.k.a. from the first State of Design column)

Every year I give myself three goals. This goal was kind of like a wish asking for more wishes in that it got me past the limit of three. Although unlike the sneaky "more wishes" wish, I don't know if having five goals instead of three was actually to my benefit. Nonetheless, let's walk through each of these subgoals:



Institute Block Design. A better listing of this goal might be "Maintain Block Design." *Time Spiral* Block was my attempt to demonstrate a different type of block design. Rather than the "cake method" of *Ravnica* (make one large block and cut it up into smaller pieces, forcing each set to have value as it's needed to complete the larger picture), I tried what I'll dub the "motif method." The idea behind the motif method was that by using a connected theme (time, which begat past, present and future), I was able to design three very distinctive sets each with its own flavor that the motif strung together.

The motif method proved to be a bit more trouble than the cake method for several reasons. First, it required a lot more work on the design and development end because each set was so unique there was less sharing of resources. The cake method, in contrast, allowed each of the small sets to follow the structure set up by the large set and thus saved a lot of work. Second, the motif method created a lot more swinginess in perception throughout the block. You see, normally, if players like one set of a block they're going to like the others. Because the motif method creates more variance there is a much higher chance of players connecting to one set while not liking another. Feedback from *Time Spiral* block has shown this to be true, although it's interesting that what was good and what was bad varies from player to player.

On the positive side, the motif method definitely created a block that had more surprise than the cake method block. Everyone pretty much got a sense of where *Guildpact* and *Dissension* were going by seeing *Ravnica*. *Time Spiral*, on the other hand, told you very little about *Planar Chaos* and *Future Sight*. (I should point out that while I see this as a net positive, others might point to it as a negative.)

I'm digressing a bit from the point of this subgoal. I set out to pursue a different type of block design, and I did. While the model has its issues I do believe it is something we'll be able to use again, and thus I'll mark this category with a check mark.

Design Between Blocks. When I first talked about this goal two years ago I said that all of you would have to wait to see how *Ravnica* and *Time Spiral* blocks intermingle to see if this was working. Well, now we have and personally, I'm pretty happy. Standard does not feel like a battle between block decks anymore, with most decks able to find things from both blocks. I believe there is still room for improvement, but in general I feel like this subgoal has been met as well.

The thing that excites me most about this goal is the task of this upcoming year. *Lorwyn* and "Jelly" blocks were designed to be the most interconnected blocks we've ever done. Each one has a unique theme and unique mechanics, yet they've been designed in such a way that each block complements the other in a subtle, not "in your face" kind of way. I'm quite proud of what we've done and I'm excited for all of you to see it.

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Design and Creative Integration. I feel we nailed this in *Ravnica* block. *Time Spiral* block definitely had integration but not in the same way. I chalk this up to the fact that nostalgia as a theme really doesn't allow you to build a new world as much as piece together ones from the past. As such, the creative team was limited in how much they could interweave the flavor into the design. Yes, the throwbacks that needed to exist were there, but there were fewer new things than a world would normally have. (I should point out that this is mostly due to the nostalgia theme and not the efforts of the creative team, who I felt worked hard on a very difficult task.)

Lorwyn block had no such problem. I feel the integration between design and creative is on par with *Ravnica* block. This means I'll give the subgoal a half check mark but not a full one. Add the subgoals together and you get two and a half out of three. Good enough that I feel this goal was met for the year.

#2 – Embrace the Tools of the Past

Here's where you can see that I also use the State of the Design column to give a few hints as to where design is going. *Time Spiral* block has its flaws (and yes, I'm getting to those), but not embracing the tools of the past was not one of them. In fact, this was probably where *Time Spiral* excelled the most, using past successes (and a few failures—hey, we can't resist trying to correct past mistakes) to build the present.

Checkmark for this goal.

#3 – Find Ways to Surprise

I feel that #3 was much like #2 in that *Time Spiral* did a good job of hitting this goal. On the plus side, I feel like current design has not lost its ability to do things the audience doesn't expect. It's nice to know after fourteen years that we're still capable of throwing a curveball. On the minus side, just because we can do something is not justification that we should. I got a number of letters this year that told me we had crossed a line we shouldn't have crossed. It's interesting to note that what that line was varied from letter to letter.



This was another goal that was a little front-loaded. I knew what we had in store and I was well aware that it was going to surprise the majority of you. I feel like I accomplished this goal, but I'll admit that I cheated a little in that I picked a goal I was pretty sure we were going to accomplish. Probably the most important impact of this goal was to educate me a little better in how to set future goals.

Although I accomplished all three goals, I don't think it tells the full story of the last year of design. I don't know if I've ever had a design more divisive than *Time Spiral* block. Usually when something hits with one section it hits with the others. Not so this year. *Time Spiral* block created a wide variety of responses—some very positive and others much less so. The most valuable result of this set of disparate reactions was that it was a year of many valuable lessons. So much so that I felt like adding a new section to this year's column: What were the design lessons I learned from this last year?

Lesson #1 – Nostalgia as a Theme, While Potent, Is Not Universal

One of the big gambles in this block was the use of nostalgia as a theme. As the Head Designer I'm constantly on the lookout for what I call "tent poles" that is themes that are strong enough to carry multiple blocks. Multicolor is the king of the tent poles followed closely by a theme coming soon to stores near you.

So how did nostalgia do? Good but not great. Here's the problem. Part of the audience, the established portion, seemed to really enjoy it. One of the great thrills of nostalgia is that it rewards people for living through the past. *Time Spiral* block (especially *Time Spiral* itself) played well to the audience that got all the little nods.

Unfortunately, it didn't play as well to the people that didn't get them. Even worse, because we played up the theme so much, the players that didn't get the references realized that there were references to get and that they didn't get them. I call this the "rich get richer" phenomenon. The invested get even more invested while the uninvested get less invested. It wasn't all negative for the newer players though. (If you remember, I spent one column asking new players to write in about the nostalgia theme.) I heard from many newer players that enjoyed having an insight into the greatest hits from the past. Others just liked the fact that they got "more bang" than the average set between the buffet of old keywords and the "timeshifted" cards.

My lesson is that nostalgia is very potent and is definitely a tool for our arsenal, but it doesn't have the universal appeal that I was hoping for to help cement it as a tent pole.

Lesson #2 – You Have To Have Something New

Time Spiral block banked on harnessing a lot of old ideas. While players did enjoy reliving old favorites, there was a strong message that they still wanted to see new things. *Planar Chaos* was probably the set that best exemplifies this issue. Because the "what if" theme centered on color-switching, the set was filled with a lot of cards that were known quantities. Black now has a *Wrath of God*, but the general understanding of *Wrath* was already in place. Yes, there were some interesting applications to deck building, but as a whole these cards didn't present the players with anything new to discover.

The oddest part about this was that *Planar Chaos* was a much harder set to design than the average expansion. Having to reshape the color pie yet stay consistent to overall color philosophy took a great deal of work. Unfortunately, much of this work could only be seen when looking at the environment in total and was invisible on a card-by-card basis. I know some critics of the set claimed that the design had been lazy because on the surface it looked like we just swapped colors on cards.

Planar Chaos didn't do enough things that felt fresh and new. In fact, I think the greatest success of the block, the "timeshifted" cards from the past in *Time Spiral*, stemmed from the fact that it ventured into a territory we had never touched. Okay, that and it was a cool idea. We'll still harness the past, but I think moving forward we're going to make sure that we do so in conjunction with new ideas.

Lesson #3 – Watch Complexity

I talked about the disconnect *Time Spiral* had with some newer players because they didn't "get" what was being referenced. The problem actually went much deeper than that. The entire design of the block hinged on things being familiar. For example, we would never have a set with the number of keywords that appeared in *Time Spiral* (eleven I think) if the keywords were new. Why? It would be too confusing. Now let's approach the set with new player eyes. To them, it *is* that confusing. There *are* eleven new keywords.

But wait, the established players don't have to imagine what it would be like. We have *Future Sight*, the set that made every player feel like a new player. *Future Sight* had close to fifty keywords, with over a dozen that were brand spanking new. I often talk about how the metaphorical pendulum swings as **Magic** keeps reinventing itself. *Future Sight* was the farthest swing on the complexity axis that we've ever taken. Don't expect to see anything of this complexity anytime soon—possibly ever again.



Lesson #4 – Design Can Be Too Clever

One of my personal goals when I became Head Designer was that I wanted to make sure that I wasn't afraid to have design push boundaries. For *Ravnica* block, for instance, I experimented with a lot of things we had never done before (divvying up items over the course of the block, not carrying a mechanic all the way through the block, etc.). *Time Spiral*, likewise, took a number of gambles.

I feel that some of the risks taken for *Time Spiral* block didn't play out quite as definitively as the ones in *Ravnica*. One of the biggest problems, I feel, was that design tried to be a little too clever for its own good. The best example was the theme of *Planar Chaos*. A lot of the feedback showed that many players didn't "get it." That problem rests solely on my shoulders. I'm the guy who came up with the idea and the one who pushed it through.

The lesson here is that innovation is a separate entity from concept. Being new doesn't mean it has to be hard to grasp. Split cards, for example, were shockingly new in their day, yet players got what they were doing instantly. While design has to constantly innovate, it has to do so in a way that doesn't leave the players behind.

Lesson #5 – There Is a Necessary Balance Between Linear and Modular

In case you haven't read my column where I [explain these terms](#), in a nutshell, "linear" cards are ones that push you towards playing them with certain other cards (think *Goblin King* or *Slivers*), while "modular" cards are ones that just fit in wherever their utility is needed (think *Naturalize* or *Shock*). Linear / modular is a spectrum. When we get too close to the linear side, players complain we're building their decks for them. When we get too close to the modular side, no one knows what deck to build.

Time Spiral Block (with a few notable exceptions like *slivers*) was very modular, so much so that I feel it didn't do enough of a job pushing you in certain directions. The lesson here is that sets need a diet of both linear and modular cards.

Lesson #6 – Learn From Your Mistakes

While I've been focusing on the *Time Spiral* block, if I point to the design that I was most disappointed with in the last year, I wouldn't be pointing fingers at *Time Spiral*, *Planar Chaos* or *Future Sight*. No, that honor belongs to *Coldsnap*. While I like the general concept of the set and I love the idea of occasionally doing sets that aren't tied to anything else, I cannot evaluate the last year and not own up that I feel *Coldsnap* was a disappointment from a design standpoint.



Why? In the end, I think the set picked the wrong focus. Too much energy was spent on making the set draft-friendly (a near impossible task for a small standalone set). Also, I think trying to stay true to the mechanics of the block hurt us as most of the meatiest things had already been explored in later sets. (For examples, one of the greatest innovations of *Ice Age* Block was the creation of cantrips, which have since become an evergreen staple of card design.) That said, I do like the innovation of snow mana (I'm talking future design potential) and there are a number of individual cards I think are very cool.

The lesson I took away from *Coldsnap* (and to a much lesser extent *Time Spiral* block) was that there is a lot to be learned from one's mistakes. I feel a lot of the work that went into *Lorwyn* and "Jelly" block design came from the lessons of the past year. Take a look next year to see how these lessons measure up against *Lorwyn* and "Jelly."

Lesson #7 – Be Gentle When Messing with Sacred Cows

In order to keep surprising the audience, design has to venture into areas that the players do not expect. The downside of this is that it means that we mess with things close to the players' hearts. As such, the players take this very personally. The best example of this would be *Planar Chaos* messing with the color pie. Wizards (and myself in particular) have spent so much time explaining why the color pie is so vital to the game that the idea of messing with it was upsetting to many players.

Time Spiral block taught me that we have to use a more gentle touch than normal. This isn't to say that we're backing away from messing with things that players might feel shouldn't be messed with, but I do feel we have to approach it with a better understanding of how the players will react.

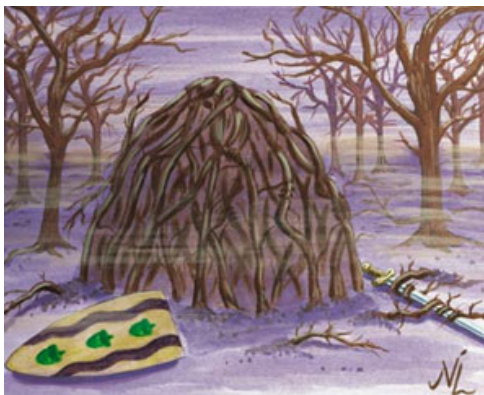
Whew, a lot of lessons! Before I move onto the goals for next year, I want to take a moment to stress something. I think I'm coming across a little harsher on design and myself than I intend. I don't think this last year was a bad year for design. We did a lot of interesting things, we innovated, we took bold risks, we found new tools. I feel like the future will look back on this year's design as one of growth. That said, this was a more divisive year for design than we've had in a long time. Not every choice paid off for every player. Not every risk was universally considered a success. This isn't to say that design isn't going to make bold choices or take risks, just that we're going to do so with the knowledge that this last year has brought us.

Now, on with the new goals:

Goal #1 – Go Back to Our Roots

It's very easy in design to get lured away by the new and flashy. Why stick in the box when there's so much cool "out of the box" stuff to find? I feel like the design of the last year was definitely pulling in this direction. For *Lorwyn* and "Jelly" blocks, we're making a concerted effort to reexamine the basics. For this next year I want to shave away some of the complexity for complexity's sake and get back to simple, clean design.

The best metaphor I can give for this idea is, of all things, **Magic** design. (How many other authors have you read that use the same topic to make a metaphor?) When a new designer starts working on **Magic**, they often seem very focused on making elaborate rares. They want splashy, cool rares that draw attention. With time, though, they learn that the real challenge of design isn't the wacky rare but rather the simple yet innovative common. Finding new design space for basic elements of the game while being concise and elegant is by far the greater challenge.



For me, this next year is about finding the "elegant common" on a block level. Can we innovate and wow without having to resort to complex mechanics and ideas? Stay tuned.

Goal #2 – Find Innovation That Doesn't Shock

The pendulum always swings. *Time Spiral* Block made many deliberate choices that we felt would shock the audience (Take 2, audience!). *Lorwyn* and "Jelly" blocks are about finding new space within areas that are comfortable. The next year isn't going to turn **Magic** on its head but rather discover ways to take elements of the game you are already familiar with and do new things with them. Don't worry though, we'll make sure to have a few surprises.

Goal #3 – Be All-Inclusive

While creating a block that was as divisive as *Time Spiral* was a good learning experience, it's not something we plan on doing on a regular basis. *Lorwyn* and "Jelly" are going to be about finding areas of the game that everyone can enjoy. The themes for this upcoming year are both pretty universal ones. Yes, we'll be doing new and different things with them, but still I feel like this next year is going to be one that all **Magic** players can embrace.

Design Me Up

And that is where I see design. This last year was one with a lot of good work and a lot of learning. I'm very optimistic on where design is heading, and I plan to return next year at this time and say very positive things. As always, I'm eager for the next year's sets to come out so I can see what all your reactions will be. Speaking of which...

Our job is to keep **Magic** fresh, to allow all of you the joy of constantly exploring and discovering. One of the things that best helps us do that is to hear from all of you what you think about the current state of **Magic** design. What are we doing that really works for you? What are we doing that annoys you? Tell us. Whether in the response thread to this column or in my email, please let me know how you feel we're doing. I've given you my opinion; I want to hear yours.

Join me next week for the time just before the legions attacked, you know, but after the judgment was made.

Until then, may you take the time to look within.

Mark Rosewater

But Wait, There's More

Before you leave for today, we have one last thing to do. It's time to vote on the topics for Topical Blend #3. I got a huge reply, so much so that I had to cut down the suggestions to a more manageable number. I tried my best to keep a wide variety of options. You may vote for one topic for each of the categories. The first is the **Magic**-related category. The second is non-**Magic**-related. I'm curious to see what you all will have me do.

List A - Magic Related (Choose One)

- Stories, great plays, and/or mistakes from actual **Magic** games I've played
- Latest Developments (Aaron's column)
- Benchmarks in **Magic** (i.e. **Grizzly Bears** as 2/2s for 2, destroying a land for three mana ala **Stone Rain**, four mana for a permanent card drawer such as **Jayemdae Tome**, and the like)
- The Top Ten Coolest Creatures Ever Designed
- Designing one drops
- Bizarre design inspirations
- Other games that influence **Magic** design
- The less-glamorous side of R&D
- Designing iconic legendary creatures (i.e., Phage, Akroma, **Dakkon Blackblade**, etc.) and their importance to the game both from a marketing perspective and from a game-play perspective
- Making decisions for a core set
- Evolution of the color wheel
- Reflections on the designs of past **Magic** blocks
- The interaction of Design with other departments
- Block design
- Old cards to which I have an emotional attachment
- The reserved dist
- The worst card in each set taken in context of when that set was released
- Inter-block connectivity
- Dead design space
- The future of the color pie
- The **Magic** Pro Tour Hall of Fame
- The "Universal Base Set," a.k.a. UBS
- Designing dragons
- Rejected Un-Set cards
- Collecting **Magic** cards
- Power creep
- Rarity switching (e.g. **Rukh Egg** and **Repentant Blacksmith**)
- When flavor and mechanics clash
- The removed-from-the-game zone
- R&D's view of "You lose the game"
- How I would have designed an old set (Alpha, *Arabian Nights*, etc.) in the present
- Designing spells that cost nothing to play
- Wacky formats
- Alternative win conditions
- Failed ideas that eventually worked
- People other than Mark Rosewater who work in R&D
- Famous people completely outside the world of gaming who would make good **Magic** designers
- Old mechanics that weren't good
- The effect of **Magic Online** on paper **Magic**
- The design of B.F.M. (from *Unglued*)
- Designing brand-new environments
- Bluffing cards
- My very first game of **Magic**
- Choosing design teams for sets
- Shapeshifters
- The design of **Tarmogoyf**
- How does Wizards lose **Magic** players?
- My greatest failures and greatest successes as a designer
- Fungus
- Top ten hits and misses in artifacts

Submit my Vote

List B - Non-Magic Related (Choose One)

- Gleemax (the alien brain in the jar, not the card)
- The evil deeds of MaGo
- Stand-up comedy
- Jim Henson and the Muppets
- Writing and the use of metaphors
- Marriage
- Censorship
- Bad movie choices
- Interesting tales from world travels
- Magic (as in real world, David Copperfield magicians)
- Urban legends
- 80s Movies
- Raising children
- Part-time jobs
- Desserts
- Things that start with the letter "X"
- Classic arcade games
- Office gossip
- Dealing with being a celebrity of sorts
- Wizards in-jokes
- Pirates
- Dungeons and Dragons** (RPGs)
- "Seinfeld"
- Harry Potter
- Chocolate
- Life as a young Rosewater
- Oxymorons
- Seven deadly sins
- Richard Garfield
- San Diego Comic-Con
- Stick Figures
- My favorite movies
- My favorite books
- My favorite TV shows (excluding "Roseanne")
- Comics and superheroes
- Science fiction
- Board games
- Writing for television / my time on "Roseanne"
- College
- Harry Houdini
- Monty Python
- The famous people I've met in my current and past career
- Puzzles
- The Internet
- Writing articles
- All things Joss Whedon
- "Lost"
- Time travel
- Picard vs. Kirk
- Reality TV shows

Submit my Vote

*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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