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# Design Language

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Making Magic

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Hey everyone, it's Wizards of the Coast Has Two Weeks Off, Um, I Mean We Want to Honor The Top Columns / Articles of the Year Week! The theme week so in demand that we run it two weeks back to back EVERY year. What this meant for me was that I had to pick my top two favorite columns of the year.

This is a hard task. Luckily, earlier this year I wrote [Three Hundred and Counting](#), which forced me to grade my last hundred columns which included the majority of this year. I quickly looked at my columns since then and decided that I had no more five-pointers. This left me with the following list:

- [Nights of the Round Table](#)
- [Fatty Fatty, Two By Four](#)
- [Connect the Dots](#)
- [Melvin and Vorthos](#)
- [Design Language](#)
- [State of Design 2007](#)
- [Topical Blend #3: Sessions](#)

I decided that I would pick the following two—the one I personally liked most and the one that I felt was the best column about **Magic** design. Today, you get the latter, the column I feel was my best about design. The nominees were: *Fatty, Fatty Two By Four*, *Melvin and Vorthos*, *Design Language*, and *State of Design 2007*.

And the winner is... (drum roll—this would be more dramatic if the title wasn't sitting above in giant letters) *Design Language*. I think that this column was very important for anyone who wants to understand one of the key elements of good game design—learning how to design to your audience.

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Two weeks ago I wrote a column entitled [Melvin and Vorthos](#) where I discussed a different axis to look at the players. Reading the thread and my email, I realized there was some confusion over how exactly Melvin and Vorthos are different from Timmy, Johnny and Spike. One point that came up multiple times was that people didn't understand how exactly the different groups affected how cards are designed. Meanwhile, two months ago during Fatty Week I wrote an article ([Fatty, Fatty, Two By Four](#)) explaining how to design big creatures with Timmy, Johnny and Spike in mind. I got a lot of feedback from that column that my readers would like to hear more about how to design for each of the psychographics.



So, one section of readers wanted to have a better understanding of the design needs of Melvin and Vorthos, while another section (which I'm sure has a lot of overlap) wants to hear more about the design needs of Timmy, Johnny and Spike. Past experience has shown that when the circles overlap in the great Venn Diagram of Life, it's time to write a column. Here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to quickly recap Timmy, Johnny, Spike, Melvin and Vorthos. I'm going to explain the basic design needs of each. Then, I'm going to explore what happens when the different axes overlap and talk about the design needs of each subgroup. If this sounds like fun, stick around. If not, join me in two weeks. (Next week is Memorial Day—an American holiday, for my non-American readers—and [magicthegathering.com](#) won't be updating. There will be a cool theme week, though, which I'm going to pick up the Monday after.)

One last thing before I jump into the thick of it. Because I'm trying to show the differences, I will be talking about the extreme version of each profile. Very few players fall squarely into one group. This means that when I talk about Timmy I'm talking about Timmy devoid of any toe dipping into Johnny or Spike. Also, I'll be talking in broad terms, which means I'll be glossing over much of the subtlety of the psychographics and personifications. Yes, not every Johnny seeks out the exact same thing. My generalizations are done for brevity, not because I see every group painted with the same broad brush.

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## Timmy, Johnny and Spike

Let's begin with the Big Three. These three terms are player psychographics. They are tools used by R&D to help the game better resonate with the players. The psychographics were created to aid in understanding the psychological motivations that make people want to play **Magic**. This in turn helps us create a game that better suits those needs. Here are brief summaries from my last column on the psychographics ([Timmy, Johnny and Spike Revisited](#)) along with some of my thoughts about the design needs of each.

### Timmy

**Timmy wants to experience something.** Timmy plays **Magic** because he enjoys the feeling he gets when he plays. What that feeling is will vary from Timmy to Timmy, but what all Timmies have in common is that they enjoy the visceral experience of playing. As you will see, Johnny and Spike have a destination in mind when they play. Timmy is in it for the journey.

**Design Needs:** Timmy's motives are straight forward and to the point. He wants to enjoy the game as he's playing it. He wants the actual experience of playing the cards to hold visceral excitement. What does this mean for design? It means that we have to make cards that are unto themselves fun. Other psychographics enjoy figuring out how to use their cards or whether or not the cards are worth their cost. Not Timmy. Timmy wants to understand right away whether or not this card is something to get excited about. This means that Timmy cards tend to be either all upside (not counting a high mana cost as many Timmies gloss over power level) or an upside that towers over a vague downside.

Timmy also enjoys cards that point him in the right direction as to what else to play with it. In R&D, we call these cards linear (see my column [Come Together](#) for a better explanation) as they tend encourage you to play specific other cards. A good example of a linear card, and a popular Timmy one at that, is **Goblin King**.



When you see **Goblin King** for the first time, you know what to do with him. Put him in a deck with a lot of goblins. What does he do? He makes your goblins better. The key to designing for Timmy is that you want all of his cards to have the clarity of **Goblin King**. Timmy wants to see the card and get excited. Note that the excitement can come from many places. Perhaps the card is awe-inspiring in its effect or coolness. Perhaps it does something that Timmy thinks would be fun to do. Perhaps it fits perfectly in a deck Timmy's already playing. Perhaps the card does something never done before.

The important point is that Timmy plays for the adrenaline rush. His cards have to both create that excitement at first glance and later create those memorable moments in play. The challenge for designing for Timmy is that the designer has to understand what kinds of things excite Timmy. He has to understand what kinds of things Timmy wants to do when he plays. He has to understand why certain drawbacks are acceptable while others are strictly forbidden (on a Timmy card at least). To design for Timmy, you have to anticipate what makes Timmy happy.

### Johnny

**Johnny wants to express something.** To Johnny, **Magic** is an opportunity to show the world something about himself, be it how creative he is or how clever he is or how offbeat he is. As such, Johnny is very focused on the customizability of the game. Deck building isn't an aspect of the game to Johnny; it's *the* aspect.

**Design Needs:** Johnny wants almost the exact opposite of Timmy. Timmy wants to see up front what each card has to offer. Johnny, on the other hand, defines the game by his ability to find things that few others have. Thus, Johnny doesn't like cards that have nothing deeper than their face value. Johnny wants cards that make him search. He enjoys having cards that don't give a clear message of what to do with them. Yes, they can hint in a certain direction, but Johnny wants to have enough room to find his own unique approach.

What this means is that Johnny tends to prefer the modular cards (once again see [Come Together](#) for a more thorough definition); that is, the cards that are more open-ended in what they interact with. Johnny likes designs that click cleanly with lots of other cards. This is why Johnny is so focused on card combinations. Any player can find a single card merely by opening it. The real challenge is finding combinations of cards that have cool and interesting interactions.

Like Timmy, Johnny likes cards that you can build around. Unlike Timmy, Johnny doesn't like the cards to be too straightforward. A good example of a Johnny card would be **Doubling Season**.



The card does push in certain directions. The card, for example, clearly wants other cards that use/create counters and/or tokens. But that directive is a far cry from getting a lot of goblins that you're going to pump. To design for Johnny you have to create cards like **Doubling Season** that challenge Johnny to find his own way to make use of them. Johnny wants to express himself. You have to design the tools to allow him to do that.

### Spike

**Spike wants to prove something**, primarily to prove how good he is. You see, Spike sees the game as a mental challenge by which he can define and demonstrate his abilities. Spike gets his greatest joy from winning because his motivation is using the game to show what he is capable of. Anything less than success is a failure, because that is the yardstick he is judging himself against.

**Design Needs:** One of the biggest myths is that designers don't need to design cards for Spike. As the myth goes, Spike will just play the best cards, so why bother designing cards specifically for him? My answer is that making Spike happy is just as much a goal as making Timmy or Johnny happy. Can you force Spike to play a card purely through power level? Yes, but that doesn't mean you can make him enjoy it. (You see, Spike is the horse, and high-power cards are the water.)

So how do you design cards for Spike? Well, let's start by looking at what motivates him. Spike plays because he wants to prove something about himself. He wants to demonstrate his ability to master **Magic** (as you'll see there are numerous ways to do this). This means the easiest way to make Spike happy is to design cards that give him an edge for being a superior player. There's nothing Spike enjoys more than outplaying his opponent. In fact, the environments Spike enjoys most are the ones where he has the ability to offset his luck through his playing skill.

The sample card I'll give for Spike is **Fact or Fiction**.



Yes, the card is powerful and that is some of its allure, but what really makes the card stand out for Spike is the variance of the card's power based on who Spike is playing against. The weaker the opponent, the stronger the card. An offshoot of this is that Spike enjoys cards that care about some section of the game (resource management probably being the most popular) that other players dismiss. This allows Spike to keep his edge in a way that is undetectable by many of his opponents. The final piece of this puzzle is that R&D has learned to take the more interesting cards designed for Spike and push their power level. This, for instance, is exactly what

happened to **Fact or Fiction**. Development pushed the card specifically because they thought the more advanced tournament players (the majority of whom are Spikes) would enjoy the skill of the card.

## Melvin and Vorthos

Melvin and Vorthos are personifications of the ends of a spectrum examining how people experience and evaluate the game. While the psychographics examine *why* people play **Magic**, this spectrum looks at *how* people *evaluate* **Magic**.



## Melvin

**Melvin evaluates cards based on how they fit into the larger structure of the game.** Melvin is looking for consistency, clarity and interconnectivity. As such, he is attracted to things that define how things work in the game: the rules, the color pie, design restrictions, costing and power level, etc. Melvin admires the craftsmanship of creating cool individual cards that conform to the overall larger structure. In particular, he appreciates the subtlety and nuances that allow variance within the defined set of rules that govern design.

**Design Needs:** Here's the part where I start explaining how Timmy, Johnny and Spike pull away from Melvin and Vorthos. When creating cards for one of the psychographics, design is trying to make cards that play the way those profiles want to play. Melvin and Vorthos don't judge the card based on what they can do with it. They judge the card based on the craft of its design and how the card fits into the larger environment of the game. Let me use a metaphor. I go see a film. Now, I have a film school background so I have the ability to be very critical when I watch a film as I have a good understanding of many of the crafts that go into making the film. Every once in a while, I will walk out and have the following conversation:

**My Friend:** So Mark, what did you think?

**Me:** It was extremely well done. The direction was excellent; the acting was top-notch. I like the cinematography and the art direction. I thought the writing was tight and well paced.

**My Friend:** So you liked it?

**Me:** Heavens no, I hated it. I almost walked out at the beginning of the third act.

How does this happen? Because admiring the craft of a film and enjoying it are two completely different ways to look at a film. One is judging the quality of the work, while the other is judging the quality of the experience. (If it seems hard to wrap your mind around how you could like one without the other, imagine a wonderfully crafted film about how correct bigotry is.) Which of these two appreciations drives whether I see the next film by the same director? **Clearly** the second. What does the artistry of the movie matter if I didn't enjoy the experience? That said, most often there is a casual link between my enjoyment of the craft and my enjoyment of the film. For instance, much of the enjoyment of one of my all-time favorite films, "Brazil", comes from the direction, cinematography and art direction.

When Melvin looks at a card, he is seeing how efficient the design is. Is the card as clean and elegant as possible? Does it accomplish its task in the simplest and most direct manner? Does it work within the structures **Magic** has created for itself? Do the rules work? Does it fit properly in the color pie? Did the designer find ways to interconnect the pieces in a way that elevates what the card is capable of doing?

Melvin is focused on the craft of the design. In my column [last week](#), I talked about how **Mystic Speculation** was a Melvin design.





The card accomplishes much with very little. It's a card with just two words of rules text—a sorcery, no less. It has interesting choices and play value and it fits neatly into one of the themes of the set. Cards don't get much more Melvin than that.

### Vorthos

Vorthos evaluates cards based on how they individually feel and how they blend together overall. Vorthos is looking for cards that holistically pull together. He wants his cards to exceed the sum of their parts. As such, he is attracted to things that help give the card flavor: the art, the name, the flavor text and relevant card mechanics. Vorthos admires the art of creating cool cards that pull you into the fantasy of the world. In particular, he appreciates the emotional responses the cards can create which make playing the game an enriching experience.

**Design Needs:** Let me start again by going back to my movie-watching metaphor. Imagine this post-cinematic dialogue:

**My Friend:** So Mark, what did you think?

**Me:** I feel like I've been put through the wringer. I was happy. Then I was angry. And then at the end, I cried my eyes out.

**My Friend:** So you liked it?

**Me:** Heavens no, I hated it. I almost walked out at the beginning of the third act.

What happened here was that the film was able to create the proper emotional responses but I felt insulted by the manipulation. The film didn't earn my tears and as such I resented it for it. On the flip side, a film that honestly takes you on an emotional roller coaster can create a memorable experience. One of the things I loved about "Harold and Maude" (my favorite film, for those keeping track of trivia like this) was how it got me to laugh and cry in a manner that didn't feel forced.

How does this apply to Vorthos? Because Vorthos, like Melvin, is looking at a certain craft of the game. Unlike Melvin, though, Vorthos is not looking at the tightness of the mechanics. Vorthos looks at the cards as a holistic whole. To make Vorthos happy, all the pieces of the card have to be working together to create an overall sense of what the card is.

As an example, let's look at [Frozen Solid](#).



Melvin looks at this card and starts questioning it. Why is blue destroying creatures? Vorthos, on the other hand, approaches the card from a much grander vantage point. Blue is the color of cold. Thus, blue should have the

ability to freeze things. **Frozen Solid** does an ample job of capturing the mechanics of what freezing someone would be. They are frozen and cannot move. If something damages the ice, due to its brittle nature, it will shatter, thus killing the frozen individual.

Vorthos want his card to make sense, not in the context of the game but in the context of flavor. Melvin drools over **Mystic Speculation**, but to Vorthos it is meaningless. Neither buyback or scry have any real meaning, thus a card that essentially does nothing fails in Vorthos' eyes.

The tricky part of designing for Vorthos is that R&D has shifted over the years away from mechanical aspects that don't have any application. Yes, it's flavorful if a knight has protection from dragons, but if the line never comes up in play, R&D has generally decided not to put it on the card. This is a blow to Vorthos, because to him "protection from dragons" adds value to the card.

Now that the terms have been defined, let's examine what happens when they intersect:

### Melvin Timmy

Timmy likes to experience things. Melvin appreciates the structure of the game. This means that Melvin Timmy is all about finding cool mechanical things he can do with the cards. Melvin Timmy searches for cards that are fun to play because what they do is fun. Melvin Timmy is the player that gets attracted to things like Slivers and poison. He played tribal decks long before R&D made them good. Melvin Timmy is happiest when the deck is doing something straightforward and fun.

**Design Needs:** Melvin Timmy wants cards that excite him because of what they do. From the first moment he reads them, he has to be drawn to play them. Melvin Timmy's stories are going to be about things that happen in the game. In particular, he likes high variance in play—that is, cards that have the potential to do great things even if often they don't quite work out. (This includes sitting in his hand because he couldn't play them that game.)



### Vorthos Timmy

Timmy likes excitement; Vorthos likes emotional impact. This means that Vorthos Timmy likes cards that just ooze impressive flavor. Vorthos Timmy hunts down cards that he wants to get into play because they feel awesome. Vorthos Timmy really gets into the larger flavor of the game and likes playing cards that capture (to him at least) the grandiosity of that flavor: the imposing creature, the awe-inspiring artifact, the devastating spell. When Vorthos Timmy talks about his games, he tells stories, because to him that is what he lived as he played.

**Design Needs:** Vorthos Timmy requires cards whose mechanics themselves ooze flavor. The best of these are top-down designs where the mechanic was created to match the flavor of the card. In addition, Vorthos Timmy loves cards where design could justify adding extra mechanical elements that exist to reinforce flavor. The best of these are ones that have a dual mechanical function, as this allows the cards to exist without breaking R&D's ban on meaningless extra abilities.



### Melvin Johnny

Melvin Johnny lives to find interesting mechanical combinations. The thrill of the game for him is to build decks that do something no one else has done before usually by finding ways to interconnect cards that no one else has yet thought to connect. In particular, Melvin Johnny loves "build around me" cards that inspire him to hunt through all of **Magic** to find the perfect combination to make the deck work.

**Design Needs:** Because Melvin Johnny is looking for mechanical connections, design has to make sure to create cards that are open-ended enough to allow Melvin Johnny the flexibility to interconnect them with other cards. Probably the juiciest design area for Melvin Johnny is the "engine" card (a card that allows one resource to be changed into another) that gives Johnny a means to fuel his deck. (Melvin Spike, by the way, also likes engine cards.)



### Vorthos Johnny

Vorthos Johnny also builds decks to show off. The big difference is that Vorthos Johnny prefers themes to mechanical combinations. While Melvin Johnny finds the next four-card infinite engine, Vorthos Johnny builds his decks around the lyrics to a song or a movie that has always been near and dear to him. Vorthos Johnny is not as focused on what the deck can do as much as he is showing what he was able to make given the restrictive (but

usually flavorful) theme he selected for himself.

**Design Needs:** Vorthos Johnny, like Melvin Johnny, looks for ways to connect his cards. The big difference is that Vorthos Johnny is focused on flavor. He wants thematic connections. While much of this rests in the hands of the creative team, the designers do have the ability to find ways to provide mechanical connections that allows creative to work around them. For example, in *Invasion* block, numerous cards were designed with the idea that they would connect into the dragon legends thematically. Also, as pointed out above, designers looking out for Vorthos Johnny should always be striving to find ways to add extra flavorful abilities that have enough mechanical rationale to be included.



### Melvin Spike

Melvin Spike is the hardcore



tournament player. He wants to win because he has a firm understanding of all the mechanical fundamentals of the game. Melvin Spike will always search out ways to grab every inch of advantage in game that he can.

**Design Needs:** As I explained when I talked about Spike, designers wanting to make Melvin Spike happy have to create cards that allow player skill to increase their power. In addition, designers can create cards that allow players to use their knowledge of the game's inner workings for extra advantage.

### Vorthos Spike

Vorthos Spike is probably the oddest cross-section. Vorthos Spikes choose to prove themselves not in their domination of play skill but in their domination of flavor. These are the people who take great pride in knowing more about the story or the creative elements of the cards than anyone else. They argue about what exactly happened in a certain novel or why a certain piece of flavor text is slightly inaccurate. To the Vorthos Spikes, flavor is just another battlefield to prove one's dominance.

**Design Needs:** The best thing designers can do for Vorthos Spike is to build in as much flavorful mechanical connection as they can and to make sure Creative is aware of the connection so that they can add to it.



## Design Up Ahead

I hope today's column helped shine a little more light on who exactly Melvin and Vorthos are, as well as letting you see the kinds of things designers have to think about when designing for Timmy, Johnny and Spike. I'm curious to hear what all you think about what I had to say today.

Remember that next week there will be no Monday content as it's Memorial Day here in the States. Because next week is a theme week and I always write on theme (and next week's theme is going to be a fun one), I will write my column on the theme in two weeks. It's not often I get to go last in a theme week.

Until then, may you enjoy the quality of the work *and* the experience.

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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