



The Space Between The Notes

Mark Rosewater
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One of my favorite parts of "[Making Magic](#)" is that I have the ability to write all sorts of different types of columns. Today I got the inkling to write a design philosophy column. How did this happen? Well, let's take a little walk, shall we?

Two weeks ago (in my column "[The Amazing Race/Class](#)") I talked about how I felt the race/class model had an amazing amount of design potential. In response to me saying this, I got a number of letters questioning whether the race/class model had, in fact, created any new design space. Perhaps this letter can sum up these feelings:

Mark,
I read your column every week and I do feel that you've had a positive impact on the game. With that out of the way, will you stop touting the "amazing design space" of the race/class model. Changing "All goblins get +1/+1" to "All soldiers get +1/+1" is not innovation! Innovation is defined as "the act of introducing something new". What's new about treating classes like races? *Onslaught* already did it. I know it's your job to make everything seem like the latest, greatest thing, but you really lose credibility when you try to sell half-baked leftovers as something new and delicious. Just own up to the fact that race/class doesn't open any new design space that wasn't already explored five years ago.
Yours truly,
E.E. Wood

My response to these letters? I was excited. Not the reaction you were expecting? The reason I got excited was because I realized that I had done a poor job of explaining what the new design space was that got opened up by the adoption of the race/class model. This meant that I had the material for a juicy column. Trust me, when you have to write a weekly column, meaty topics like this are something to get excited about. In addition, writing on this topic would allow me to touch upon something that I feel is a key element of trading card game design. And that was a column I was pumped to write.

So *that* is what I'm up to today. If it sounds interesting, stick around.

"Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction."

My major in college was broadcast & film (aka TV and movies) with an emphasis in screenwriting. As such, I took quite a number of screenwriting courses. Of all the things I learned in those classes the following quotation was one of the lessons that most stuck with me and I believe has greatly influenced how I both wrote and do card design. Here's the quote:

No scene is worth a line; no movie is worth a scene.

Now let me translate. What my teacher was saying was this. When you are writing a movie (or a television show or a play or any story-telling endeavor), the importance of the whole is more important than any one piece. Often writers fall in love with a line of dialogue or with a particular scene so much so that they force it in even when it is not in the best interest of the script. Every inch of a good script has to be moving the story forward. If the writer wastes time catering to the whim of some element that he enjoys but which doesn't accomplish this task, he is lessening the quality of his work.

This lesson is a crucial one and as I will explain in the next section at the heart of what makes good trading card game



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design. Artists by the nature of creation tend to fall in love with their own works. This isn't a bad thing. In fact, I believe it is essential for good art for the artist to be completely committed to what he is doing. But part of art is learning to self-evaluate and self-edit. Every idea, every word, every ounce of your creation has to be subject to scrutiny. Yes, the line might be the cleverest thing you have ever thought of but if it doesn't fit it doesn't matter how clever it is.

What my professor was teaching us is that to do your best work you have to learn when to let something go. And trust me, doing so hurts. It's easy to rid your art of something you hate. It's much harder to rid it of something you love. But that is the act of creation.

So what does this have to do with trading card design? Everything.

"In the land of the blind, the one-eyed is king."

Now let's talk about how this applies to trading card design. Most people when they try to evaluate a set start by looking at individual cards. In fact, most of the articles that surround a set's release begin by examining the cards one by one. Because of this, I believe many people jump to the following conclusion: the quality of a set is determined by the quality of the individual cards in that set. Show of hands - who agrees with that statement? Who disagrees? Second group, you get a gold star. The quality of a set (in my humble opinion) is not determined by the quality of the individual cards.



To prove my point: Let's try a hypothetical experiment. Let's say as lead designer of a set I design a skeleton that plans out what role each card is going to have. This card is a small white common creature. This card is an uncommon red direct damage spell. This card is a rare black build-around-me enchantment. Then I find the top X card designers in the world where X is the number of cards in the set. I give each designer a slot and give them six months to design their one card. Meanwhile during the same six months, I take a stab at designing a card for each slot. At the end of six months, I have two sets, one designed by the cadre of top designers and one designed by myself. Which one would be better?

For purposes of talking about these two designs, I'll call the first the group design and the second the single design. Which is more likely to be the better design? Hands-down the single design. And no, I'm not saying I'm better than the other two hundred plus card designers in the world. (I have a large ego but despite what my new photo hints at, not *that* big.) My point is that in the single design set each card would have been designed with all the other cards in mind. The set would have synergy. The cards would have been created to play well with the other cards. The group set might have a lot of amazing one-of card designs in it, but by the nature of its design it would be discombobulated. The set would feel very chaotic, quite possibly with many cards stepping on the toes of others near it in color and rarity. Some cards might actively fight what other cards in the set are trying to do.

Here's the interesting thing: Let's say you took those two sets and did market research on the sets by randomly showing cards from them. I would expect the group design would score higher than the single design, as each designer had plenty of time to maximize the punch of their individual card. For the second study, we let players play with the cards for a week and then collect their thoughts. I would expect the single design to do much better than the group design.

If one would test well in one scenario and the other in a different one, how can I confidently claim that single design would be better? Because the first scenario mimics the way many people first experience a set: by looking at individual cards. The second scenario mimics the real world playing experience. Players are judging their cards based on how they *play*. Which is more likely to sell more cards in the long run (and yes, I believe card sales are probably the rawest data to look at that can tell you the popularity of a set), the set that excited you when you opened your first pack or the set that created fun games? I know the answer to this one. Without naming names I will say that we've had **Magic** sets that looked exciting but didn't play as well as they looked and other sets that didn't look exciting but played well, and the latter sets sold much better over the long haul.

And now we get to my point. In the end, sets are judged by how fun they are to play and this metric very much cares about the whole being greater than sum of a set's parts. Synergy is king in a game built around the interconnectivity of its pieces. Thus, quality of a set is based much more on synergy than it is on individual card design. You will note that the evolution of **Magic** technology has been the move towards synergy. As we have gotten better at understanding trading card design we have put more and more focus on caring how the pieces work together.

A quick aside – I do want to stress that creating synergy doesn't mean just creating linear cards. That is, synergy is more than just making cards that want to be played with another narrowly defined subset of cards. Modular cards which are designed to be open-ended can be created with just as much synergy potential, especially when the designers understand in what directions the various open-ended cards are focused.

This brings us back to my professor's quotation. Let's now apply it to trading card design. No card is worth the set. By that I mean that a designer shouldn't include a card no matter how good it is if it flies in the face of what the set is about. (And yes, we occasionally *do* do this, but almost always I believe to the detriment of the set; note, by the way, that being neutral to a set is a very different animal than contradicting it.) Remember, **Magic** is a hungry beast when it comes to design. If you've created a good card, it will find a home. There will come a set where the card becomes synergistic (or at worst neutral to the synergy). That home, though, often isn't the set during which you first created it. This is one of the most important lessons a new designer has to learn. It's a hard one. The desire to fight for your pet card here and now is a strong force to contend with. But as my professor taught me many years ago, to commit to your art is to understand the priority of your choices.

"Discovery consists of seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought."

So how does all of this tie into what race/class offers design? For starters, I think it shows that I am looking from a very different vantage point when I examine race/class. I wasn't looking for what individual cards it can create but rather what kind of an *environment* it can create. What can be done with race/class not from an individual card design state of mind but from a collective synergy of the set state of mind? What kind of environment can race/class create that a single creature type cannot?



To understand this let's take a look at four creature types that I will call Creature Type A, Creature Type B, Creature Type C and Creature Type D. What kind of cards can I design in a single creature type world? I can make "Creature Type A Rocks" cards, "Creature Type B Rocks" cards, "Creature Type C Rocks" cards and "Creature Type D Rocks" cards. What decks will these allow? Four deck types - Creature Type A decks, Creature Type B decks, Creature Type C decks and Creature Type D decks.

Now let's switch over to race/class world. In this world, we'll assume that Creature Types A and B are races while Creature Types C and D are classes. Once again, I make "Creature Type A Rocks" cards, "Creature Type B Rocks" cards, "Creature Type C Rocks" cards and "Creature Type D Rocks" cards. Now how many decks can I build? A lot more than four. For starters, I still have the same decks as above - Creature Type A decks, Creature Type B decks, Creature Type C decks and Creature Type D decks. Next I have every combination of each race paired with each class. Then I have the ability to major in a race type (meaning every card in my deck is of that type) and minor in both class types or major in a class type and minor in both race types. That creates four more decks. Basically, in a race/class world I have the freedom to mix and match creature types much more easily than I do in single creature type world.

But wait, there's more. Let's examine what situations these two environments create in play. To do this, let me quickly design a few cards.

Guy #1

```
<mana cost>
Creature - A
1/1
```

Guy #2

```
<mana cost>
Creature - B
1/1
```

Guy #3

```
<mana cost>
Creature - C
1/1
```

Guy #4

```
<mana cost>
Creature - D
1/1
```

A's Are Awesome

```
<mana cost>
Enchantment
A creatures you control get +1/+1
```

B's Are Basilisk-y

```
<mana cost>
Enchantment
B creatures you control gain deathtouch.
```

C's Are Crafty

```
<mana cost>
Enchantment
C creatures you control gain first strike
```

D's Are Dastardly

```
<mana cost>
Enchantment
D creatures you control gain lifelink
```

In the single creature type world, the following can happen:

- Guy #1 becomes a 2/2.
- Guy #2 gains deathtouch.
- Guy #3 gains first strike.
- Guy #4 gains lifelink.

For race/class world, we'll keep the same enchantments but update our creatures:

Guy #1

<mana cost>
Creature - AC
1/1

Guy #2

<mana cost>
Creature - AD
1/1

Guy #3

<mana cost>
Creature - BC
1/1

Guy #4

<mana cost>
Creature - BD
1/1

In the race/class world, the following can happen:

- Guy #1 becomes a 2/2.
- Guy #2 gains deathtouch.
- Guy #3 gains first strike.
- Guy #4 gains lifelink.
- Guy #1 gains first strike.
- Guy #2 gains lifelink.
- Guy #3 gains deathtouch
- Guy #4 becomes a 2/2.
- Guy #1 becomes a 2/2 and gains first strike.
- Guy #2 gains deathtouch and lifelink.
- Guy #3 gains deathtouch and first strike.
- Guy #4 becomes a 2/2 and gains lifelink.

Race/class has just tripled the possibility of what can happen. In addition, it has created game states that could never happen in single creature type world. Deathtouch and first strike, for example, combo very well together, but that overlap could never happen in single creature type world. Also, note that these changes would grow at an even faster rate as more options are entered into the mix.

Race/class increases deck building options and increases interaction of cards, each of which allow the designers a lot more avenues to explore. If decks can be built around one race and one class, that allows the designers to create cards for such decks. If interaction goes up, that allows designers to create effects that purposefully interact. Each of these options opens up what is available to the players and in turn opens up possibilities for the designers.

Remember the importance on synergy that I explained above? More than anything, race/class allows whole new areas of synergy. Rather than running parallel with one another, we now have creature types that get to intersect. Any tribal card has potential now to work with any other card in the set. Race/class adds a dynamic that completely reinvents what is possible with tribal. *That* is the added design space I was talking about.

Say Goodnight Gracie

I hope today's column gave you all a few ideas to chew on. I'm curious to see your reactions in the thread and in my inbox. And if anyone else wants to write me a nasty email, feel free. I have a lot more columns to write.

Join me next week when I'm more counter-intuitive than normal.

Until then, may you learn the value of sometimes letting go.

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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