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-1/-1 Singular Sensation

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 Making Magic
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Welcome to -1/-1 Counter Week. It's just like +1/+1 Counter Week, except more things die. For those of you that somehow haven't yet looked at a *Shadowmoor* cardlist or booster pack (and really, what's up with that?), I'll let you in on a little secret: -1/-1 counters are back, in a big, big way. But wait, you say, as a longtime reader of *Making Magic*, you know that I've said numerous times that we no longer do -1/-1 counters (with the obvious exceptions of throwbacks such as in *Time Spiral* block).

In fact, one reader went and dug up the very two paragraphs where I explained why we abandoned -1/-1 counters: (the paragraphs, by the way, are from my May 6, 2002 column entitled [Phantom of the Soap Opera](#), where I explained the phantom mechanic that was premiering in the new *Judgment* set). Here's his letter:

Dear Mark Rosewater,

Regarding -1/-1 counters:

What on earth prompted the team at Wizards to abandon your wisdom, outlined below with regard to -1/-1 counters? Is it purely to balance the +1/+1 theme of *Lorwyn*? Is it the usual excuse of design space? Is there really anything so great about -1's that can't be replicated with a loss of +1's?

"Each packet of damage, regardless of its amount, shrinks the creature by -1/-1. The reason behind the change from this version to the +1/+1 version is rather simple: we don't do -1/-1 counters anymore. Okay, that's not exactly true. We do use them occasionally but only in a very specific way. As an example, *Shambling Swarm* from *Torment* does in fact use -1/-1 counters, but please notice that they only last until end of turn.

"Why do we do that? Because 99% of the time we can mimic the desired effect using +1/+1 counters and the loss of the 1% is worth the clarity that only having one type of power/toughness-altering counters creates. When you look across the table and see a creature with counters on it, you know they are +1/+1 counters. I know this paragraph will prompt a few letters, but please know that I'm currently working on my "why simplicity isn't evil" column in which I will explain in a much larger context why we do things like that. (As an aside, changing to the +1/+1 counters did add the "Holy Strength and live forever" trick.)"

-William

But wait, didn't I just [talk about -1/-1 counters](#) during +1/+1 Counter Week back on February 11 of this year?

With the exception of *Time Spiral* block and all its throwback nostalgia, we haven't printed a -1/-1 counter in many years. The reasoning behind this as I state above is that about ninety percent of all the design space that -1/-1 counters can do can be done by +1/+1 counters.

Somehow during the intervening six years, -1/-1 counters' design space increased by 800% (this means that in about 70 years it will reach 100%). Anyway, it does bring up a pretty important point. How is it six years later -1/-1 counters went from being an absolute no-no, "we don't do that anymore" rule to a subtheme for an entire block? This, of course, leads into a much bigger question. Why do I tell the players that certain rules exist only to blatantly break them later? Or to stay in theme, why *are* -1/-1 counters in *Shadowmoor*? All this will be explained in today's column.

Breakin' It

I guess I'll start big picture and work my way down. Why does **Magic** break its own rules? That's kind of asking why a bird flies or why a fish swims. **Magic** breaks its own rules

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because it was a game designed specifically to break its own rules. When Richard Garfield created **Magic** and the trading card game genre, he was motivated by the following idea. He wanted to create a game that was "bigger than the box." What he meant was that he wanted to create a game that was larger than any one individual part of the game. Much of the joy of a trading card game would be the exploration of the game itself.

In order to accomplish this task, Richard had to set a few ground rules. The most important one was the following: the cards trump the rules. If a card says you can do something, you can even if the basic rules say you cannot. The cards have the ability to add new rules or tweak existing rules. This is essential because if all the rules had to be written down outside of the cards then players wouldn't have the joy of discovery that comes from finding new cards. It is much cooler, for instance, to learn from **Howling Mine** that there is a way to draw more than one card a turn than having the section in the rules about card drawing let you know that some cards can allow such a thing. Also, from a practicality standpoint, there is no good way to manage the influx of new information as cleanly and as clearly as allowing exceptions to live on the cards.

It was also important to Richard that players could play solely with the cards they own. Allowing the rules to carry their own weight meant that you could understand what was going on (roughly) solely by reading the cards. Perhaps you can see where I'm going. If cards have the ability to trump the rules, then the game is at its core a "rule-breaking game."

But on the flip side, part of what allows **Magic** the freedom to keep shifting and evolving is a rigid structure that helps make all the various pieces feel as if they are connected. Rules, templating, color philosophies, etc. have to all be consistent to make **Magic** feel like the same game year after year. This means that **Magic** has to have a strict structure and constantly be breaking its own rules.



Luckily, these two things go together more easily than one might assume at first thought. Tight structure helps enhance the rule breaking. Why? Because of the importance of contrast. For example, let's take -1/-1 counters. Let's say we never put a moratorium on -1/-1 counters. Imagine design could use them whenever a card needed it, they were just something that was always around. Now we do *Shadowmoor* with its -1/-1 counter theme. Is it as exciting? No. First, -1/-1 counters have become kind of passé as they're just always around. Second, since designers have been allowed to use -1/-1 counters, we've slowly been mining their design space. The things that *Shadowmoor* does with them probably aren't as unique.

So the game has a tight structure and keeps breaking its own rules. What does this lead to? Yes, rules about rule-breaking (one day I'll do my ironic column about irony in design). That's my topic for today's column. How and why do we decide to break a certain rule? Some readers with astute memories will remember a column I did called [Rule Breaking](#) around the release of *Planar Chaos*. In it, I talked about certain false assumptions players have about design. That column talks more about the philosophy behind why R&D needs to break rules. My focus today is more on how we decide to break a certain rule. If this topic interests you and you hadn't read "Rule Breaking," I recommend that you give it a try.

The Rules for Breaking Rules

#1) Rules Have to Be Broken for a Reason

There is no force more alluring or more dangerous in design than the desire to do something that has never been done. I see the trend with every new designer (and yes, I went through this when I was starting out). They come and they want to do the thing that hasn't been done before, but not because it helps solve a problem or because it builds upon a design they're doing. They want to do the new thing solely for the sake of it being new. If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, then the road to mediocre design is paved with, well, it's also paved with good intentions. The desire to find new design space is an admirable one but without a purpose it is easily led astray.



Since this is -1/-1 Counter Week, let's explore why we chose to break the "no -1/-1 counter" rule. As I explained in my column [Shadowmoor than Meets The Eye, Part III](#) we were looking for a way to represent the idea of a "kinder, gentler" environment. Rather than killing, spells and creatures could merely hurt other creatures. -1/-1 counters seemed like a tool that might accomplish this task. Normally when the talk of -1/-1 counters come up, I always ask myself if +1/+1 counters could accomplish the same task. If the answer is yes, I abandon the -1/-1 counters. There is a lot of baggage that comes from using -1/-1 counters. We should only consider using them if and only if what we want to accomplish cannot be done using our normal tools.

This is an important distinction. Design shouldn't look outside the box unless inside the box doesn't work. Our rules and structures have purpose. They are there for very important reasons. Designers need to respect them. That said, when they don't serve the design at hand, the designers have to feel free to explore other options. We embraced -1/-1 counters during *Lorwyn* design because they filled a unique role. We moved them to *Shadowmoor* because we discovered that they didn't fulfill the role we first imagined (the "kindler, gentler" feel) but fulfilled an equally important one (the "meaner, crueler" feel).

#2) Respect the Reasoning Beneath the Rule

One day in high school, the kids in the honors classes were excused from class for the day to go to a seminar. In it was a motivational speaker who spent the day talking about how each of us could get a better sense of who we are and what we were capable of. He was a very good speaker and many of his words stick with me to this day. One of the concepts he talked about was how different people functioned at different levels. I don't remember the name of the scale (I'm sure a kind reader will fill me in), but it went from zero to six and it talked about what drove the person's actions. The most interesting contrast for me was the contrast between levels four and five. Level four followed laws. Level five followed ideals.



For example, a person of level four would never break the law, for it was the law itself that they used to define their actions. A level five person though would break a law if he or she felt it was unconstitutional. That is, the level five person could see that a law didn't follow the larger ideal that crafted the law and feel as if the law was unjust. For example, civil disobedience is built upon this principle. The law is challenged because it is inconsistent with the ideals that created it.

I bring this up because this distinction is at the core of this rule. When a designer breaks a rule, he or she has to understand what the reasoning was that formed the rule in the first place. Most often, there is a way to break individual rules without breaking the rationale for the rule. Let's use -1/-1 counters as an example. The reason the rule exists is not that there is some inherent evilness to -1/-1 counters but rather that the existence of multiple power / toughness altering counters causes confusion. In **Magic's** early days, all sorts of counters comingled and it was at times quite baffling. The +1/+1 counter became the standard because it was one of the easiest to grok, it had the most intuitive feel, and it allowed the most mechanical flexibility.

Since the rule at the core was intended to prevent confusion, that meant that a set that wanted to use the -1/-1 counter had to exclude all other power / toughness-altering counters from it. If -1/-1 counters were to exist then +1/+1 counters could not. By extension, this leads the design to want to maximize what -1/-1 counters can do, because that is the only counter available to the set. It was this forced exploration of -1/-1 counters' depth, by the way, that led me to reevaluate how much unique design space -1/-1 counters had.

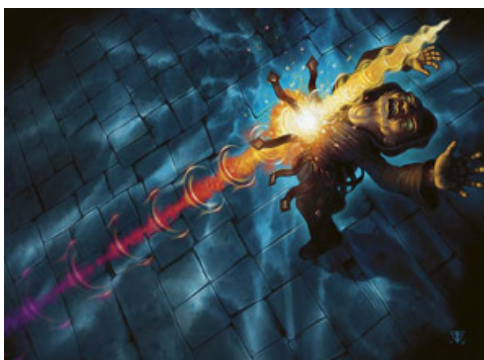
#3) Breaking a Rule Once Isn't an Allowance to Continually Break It

Another interesting misconception is that once we break a rule we've eliminated the need to uphold it in the future. This couldn't be farther from the truth. In order for design to constantly evolve and break new rules, we have to continually line up the old rules. If each rule broken stayed broken in future sets, the game would drift far from its roots. What keeps the game grounded is the fact that after each shift, the game shifts back.

What this means for -1/-1 counters is that their use in *Shadowmoor* isn't a sign that they've permanently returned. Come *Shards of Alara*, we will return to the standard of +1/+1 counters. Will we ever see -1/-1 counters again? Sure. In fact, their successful use in *Shadowmoor* has definitely opened our eyes to their potential, but that means that we're more likely to return to a world of -1/-1 counters than we are to print a random card using -1/-1 counters.

One Rule to Ring Them All

We create rules because design needs the structure and the game needs the consistency. We break rules because that's what **Magic** (and really any trading card game) does. The important lesson for this column is that we don't break rules out of disrespect. In fact, I believe the act of choosing to break a rule is a sign of great faith in that rule. We break rules that have meaning in their breaking. And we only do so with great forethought.



But what of a Standard filled with its numerous +1/+1 and -1/-1 counters? Haven't we forsaken the clarity that I stressed six years ago that we needed so badly? We have to some degree, because every violation comes with a cost. But we do so because we believe the cost is worth it. The value we receive we view as equal to or greater than the pain we force upon the game. This risk analysis is something we have to evaluate every time we create a new set. And to be honest, it one of the great thrills of **Magic** design. How can we keep surprising all of you yet keep the game's integrity intact? This little dance is what keeps me interested thirteen years into the job. And trust me, as the guy who's constantly planning out "the next block," the roller coaster ride is far from over. The big question is, what twist is around the next bend?

I hope you enjoyed today's column. It was a little more philosophical than most. I'm curious what you all feel about this type of column. More? Less? Should I find a way to work in hand puppets? Let me know in my email or in the thread.

Join me next week when... let's just say you might get very annoyed.

Until then, may you enjoy the curves life throws at you.

Mark Rosewater

Magicthegathering.common Knowledge

Before I wrap up for today, I have some news I'd like to share. Most of the time I go behind the scenes in design and development, but today I want to talk about the **magicthegathering.com** team (who, little known fact, are also in R&D). There has been a little shake-up with the team that puts this site together and I thought it might be of interest to all of you.

For a while now, the web team was managed together with the creative team. Recent changes have reorganized the management structure, and the web team is now on its own. Scott Johns was selected to oversee the team with the spiffy new title of Editor in Chief. Scott has been working on **magicthegathering.com** for over four years, and before that he had a substantial background editing various **Magic** web sites. While Scott is probably best known for his Pro Tour resume (one win, five final days, first ever back-to-back-to-back Top 8s), he has also spent a lot of time playing around kitchen tables and with wacky decks online. Scott is a longtime player who has had the opportunity to dip his toe into many different facets of the game. I believe his unique insight into **Magic** along with his substantial web experience make him the ideal person to lead the web team as they continue building the incredible new **Magic** site they'll be unveiling later this year.

In addition to Scott's promotion, the web team will also be adding Pro Tour player and tournament coverage reporter Bill Stark. Bill has reported on, written about, and played in high level **Magic** for many years as well as working on other **Magic** web sites and is an excellent addition to an already stellar web team. Bill will be joining as an intern to help out with the redesign and any other projects the team can throw at him. I want to be the first to officially welcome Bill to the team and congratulate Scott on his promotion. Congrats guys!



*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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