

A short guide to the flavor text process

Adding a Little Flavor

Rei Nakazawa, **Magic** creative text writer

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It's often ignored, often made fun of, but most players would notice if it suddenly disappeared tomorrow. And the game would be worse off if it did. Yes, it's flavor text, sometimes a storytelling point, sometimes a cheap gag, always controversial. If you thought **Magic** players couldn't agree on card abilities, you should listen to a debate on flavor text sometime! Players are not alone, either; the process that gets those quotes on the cards has to take into account the fact that artistic taste varies wildly from person to person, and the fine folks at Wizards of the Coast are no exception. So let's take a peek into the way that flavor text gets on cards:

WE GOTTA HAVE STANDARDS!

First, it's important to know that there are general guidelines that every flavor text selection team follows to make sure we're putting forward the face of **Magic** that we want to put forward. I'll get more into these guidelines when it's time for all of you to write flavor text for You Make the Card. We often choose flavor text based on what category it falls into (Anthony Alongi wasn't too far off with [his breakdown](#)) and how appropriate it is for the card we want to put it on, in terms of color, ability, and concept. For example, humor isn't often found on Elf cards, but it's everywhere on Goblin cards. Cards of different colors have different tones to them. You certainly can't imagine [Mutilate's](#) flavor text on a white card, for example. We have to consider all these factors, plus the guidelines I haven't gotten into yet, plus card length constraints, PLUS personal taste, so you can imagine how difficult this job can get. So how is it all created? Let's follow the journey of one particular card from *Torment*, [Balshan Collaborator](#), to see how it's all done.

FOR THE BIRDS

[Balshan Collaborator](#) started its life as "Flying Shade," a 2/2 blue flyer that pumped for 🐦. No real name, no creature type, just an ability. Of course, when the development team is trying to hone the set into something playable, that's all they really need to know. But we creative folks need more -- a lot more. So we started with the concept, the idea of what a card is and what it represents. Since blue flyers in the *Odyssey* block are generally Aven, the idea immediately came to mind that this was an Aven that had allied with the Cabal. After all, *Torment* is the black-heavy set, so why shouldn't a normally blue creature go over to the dark side?

Now that we had the concept, we could turn it over to the writers. Who these writers are has varied over the years. During the *Weatherlight* Saga, a core group of specially chosen writers familiar with the story arc was responsible for most of the flavor text, in order to ensure that the storyline flowed

smoothly. These days, the writers include a wide variety of volunteers from throughout Wizards, from Customer Service to Web Design, and myself (the only person in the company who lists "flavor text writing" in his job duties).

ALL YOUR NAMEBASE ARE BELONG TO US

Examples of flavor text that were easy -- and not so easy -- for the team to agree on.

Once we have the writers, we give them a deadline and ask them to write for a specific set of cards. In the old days, every individual writer would submit a *Microsoft Word* file with all of his or her work. These would be collected into a single document, sent out to the flavor text team, and voted on. The

votes would then be collected, and the list of possible quotes reduced based on what the team generally didn't like. Obviously, this was very time-consuming, so the NameBase -- a web-based database on the Wizards internal server -- was born. It automatically collects quotes and counts up votes, which makes my job a whole lot easier. Now the NameBase can just spit out a report listing all the quotes submitted, minus the ones that most of the team voted sub-par.

Once all the votes are in, the team gets together and discusses each list, pushing our personal favorites and discussing which piece is best for that card. Editors and R&D members sometimes sit in to make sure that the pieces chosen are appropriate and don't contradict the card mechanic. Sometimes, it's easy; for example, as soon as we saw Doug Beyer's submission for [Deep Analysis](#), we knew we had to take it. More often than not, though, it takes a while. There was a lot of argument over [Patrol Hound](#)'s flavor text before majority opinion pushed it onto the card. This is natural, given that humor is one of the most divisive and difficult types of writing to pull off well. It's still remarkable, though, that with all the potential conflicts in taste and style, we still manage to find something we can all agree is good enough to be printed on a **Magic** card.

REPORT CARDS

To the right is a scan of a section of one of those NameBase reports. Though this is from an early stage of voting (with only two people's opinions logged in), it gives you an idea of what we see when we choose flavor text. Here you can see a fairly wide variety of flavor text types. Though I'll wait to describe the various types for You Make the Card, you'll notice that they're mostly fairly serious. One of the things that made "Power, gold, crackers" stand out was that attempt at humor. It's easy to be funny on, say, a Goblin card, but thinking of appropriate Elf humor is another thing entirely. The team admired the successful joke here. It also showed, through the attribution to [Chainer](#), that the writer was paying attention to the background we give flavor text writers on the storyline and characters. He managed to create a joke that was entirely within Chainer's personality, in an unexpected way. While there are a lot of factors to deal with in flavor text (appropriateness to the card, style, and so on), one thing remains the same: it's always good to stand out. And that piece stood out in the team's minds in a good way. Thus, the flavor text for [Balshan Collaborator](#) was born.

One card down, 100+ more to go. It may look like a lot of work, and that's because it is. Everyone who works on **Magic** cares about putting out the best product we can. After all, the creative element is a big reason why the product is so memorable. So the next time you read over a card, take a

moment to look over the flavor text, and remember that it went through just as much scrutiny as the card mechanic above it.

SPECIAL BONUS GAME!

Considering how much flavor text I write for **Magic**, it's inevitable that there are some that aren't used. To give you an idea of what sort of stuff I, at least, write for my job, and to offer a couple of nice bonuses, here are a couple of games for you. The first is a list of ten pieces of flavor text I wrote. Nine were written for *Odyssey* or *Torment* cards, and you have to guess which cards I wrote them for. There may be many possible answers, so take your best guess and see how close you can get. To make it easier, I listed the card type next to the quote. What's the tenth quote? Well, that one is a piece of flavor text I wrote too, except it was accepted, and it's in *Judgment!* See if you can figure out which one!

Hints: Note whether the piece has quotation marks or not; if it does, then the card's subject is usually the speaker, unless the quote is attributed to someone else. Think about what the piece might have to do with the card's color and mechanic.

- A) *"When confronting something as vile as the Cabal, there is no such thing as 'going too far.'"*(Creature)
- B) *"Humans travel in schools, and are quite mindless. Thus, they are a very easy catch." -- Ambassador Laquatus* (Enchantment)
- C) *"Laws are for weaklings, kings are for fools. If you can bear freedom, stand with me!"* (Creature)
- D) *It melts into peat without a sound. The next noise you hear will be your own tortured screams.*(Creature)
- E) *"The canopy is my roof, the leaf beds my carpet. The mighty oaks are my walls, the animals my neighbors. The forest is my home, and my world, and I shall not abandon it."* (Creature)
- F) *"The Cabal revived me, thinking they could control me. The fools."* (Creature)
- G) *He remembers enough of his life to weep for what he has lost.* (Creature)
- H) *If you dare the swamps around the Cabal's stronghold, don't be surprised if you leave your mind behind.* (Sorcery)
- I) *When she takes wing, even mana rips itself apart in sheer joy.* (Creature)
- J) *"Respect is earned. The emperor shall earn yours with your blood, if need be."* (Creature)

The second game has to do with the current round of Friday Night Magic promo cards, which are popular older cards that have literary flavor text put onto them. The one listed below is a quote that I dug up for a card that was slated to be part of this promotional round, but was cut for various reasons. Can you guess what that card was going to be?

"The strongest man in the world is the one who stands most alone." - Henrik Ibsen, An Enemy of the People, trans. Roberts (Creature)

The answers to both these puzzles will be revealed in a future Magic Arcana, but until then, feel free to discuss them on the [message boards](#). Good luck, and have fun!

Comments? Questions? Let me hear it at editor@wizards.com. (I don't want puzzle answers, though.)