

The making of the *Odyssey Cycle* storyline Caught in the Mirari's Wake, Part 1

Will McDermott

Monday, May 20, 2002



- [Will McDermott Archive](#)

Part One: Breaking with Tradition

Here we stand today, with *Judgment*, the third *Odyssey* block card set, about to come out, and the story of the Mirari's journeys across Otaria sparking debates on **Magic: The Gathering** story boards all over the Internet. But two years ago, the Mirari didn't even have a name and no one had ever heard of the continent of Otaria -- not even the people whose job it was to create, edit, and track the **Magic** story across the multiverse.



Over the next few weeks, I will give you an inside look at the creative process that produced not only a new continent on Dominaria, but also one of the most powerful artifacts since the *Weatherlight* itself. The story (for me, at least) starts in the break room at the Wizards of the Coast offices in Renton, Washington, where a group of young, creative authors, editors, and designers met for an "author summit" over the course of three days to break with tradition and create a new **Magic** storyline.

Present at the author summit were the following people: Scott McGough, then creative editor for the **Magic** storyline; Jess Lebow, line editor for all **Magic: The Gathering** novels at the time; Daneen McDermott, former continuity manager for **Magic**, now a content producer for Fisher-Price; Vance Moore, author of *Prophecy* and several **Magic** short stories; J. Robert King, author of many **Magic** novels, including the [Invasion Cycle trilogy](#), which would end the old storyline; and me, Will McDermott, editor-in-chief (at the time) of *TopDeck* magazine and author of the *Urza's Cycle* guide books.

Over the course of summit, we also had a few guests, including Mark Rosewater and Bill Rose, who gave us the skinny on R&D's early plans for mechanics and cards in the set. For example, at the time, Mark and Bill told us that Argon (the code name for the *Odyssey* block) would be centered on two themes: graveyard as resource and decking as an alternative win condition. As we brainstormed ideas for the story, we tried to incorporate the R&D information wherever we could (including some ideas for dementia casters). Tyler Bielman, then part of the **Magic** brand team, also showed up to present brand's stance on what makes **Magic** great.

In addition to all that information, Jess and Scott had prepared a document called "Argon and Beyond: The New Face of **Magic: The Gathering**." In here was a wealth of information about where they saw the story heading after the apocalypse. They laid out that the story should take place from 30 to 100

years after the Phyrexian invasion in a location roughly equal in size to the Australian continent, where there is ample mana of all colors. But life would be hard for the Dominarian societies living in the post-apocalyptic world. Artifacts would be rare after the war, but Magic would flow more freely and, like in America's Old West, everyone would be packing and duels would be used to settle scores.

Looking back, I can see much of what is now known as the Order, the Cephalid Empire, the Cabal, and the Barbarian tribes laid out in this document. The terms "Order" and "Cabal" actually appear in the "Argon" story document. Interestingly, under blue, it says, "The blue school wants to control the main artifact in this storyline, and they plan to use it to aid them in flooding Dominaria so aquatic life will rule the plane." The document even lists the motto of the Order: "Peace must be preserved at all costs." And the characterization of red mages is interesting: "Red martial mages are aggressive loners. They strive for power because power will save their life."



As you can see, we authors at the summit had a lot of information thrown at us, and this was all in the morning of the first day. We had to come up with a story that somehow fit in with (1) what R&D had planned for the set (but remember they had only concepts -- no actual cards had been created for the *Odyssey* block yet), (2) what brand saw as the marketable aspects of **Magic**, and (3) (and most importantly as far as I'm concerned) the creative vision of the people actually in charge of the storyline. That was no small task, especially following the 13 sets and 13 novels (if you include the *Rath and Storm* anthology) that made up the previous storyline.

A Break From the Old

First, and foremost, the story team felt it was important to make a break with the past. Over the course of four years, the *Weatherlight* Cycle had grown from a simple story about adventurers in a flying ship sailing off to save their captain to a millennia-spanning saga pitting godlike planeswalkers against a godlike demon from a hellish dimension. This begged the question, "After you blow up the world, what do you do next?" The answer was, of course, to start small again with a new cast of characters in a land not yet seen in the story. This was the story team's vision and one of the first things we tackled at the summit.

Starting over meant coming up with new protagonists and antagonists (good guys and bad guys). Looking at the *Weatherlight* Cycle and the card expansions in that block, you see that the role of good and bad are very stereotypically given to white and black in the game of **Magic** (with blue thrown in for good and green and red playing whatever part they were handed from novel to novel). Gerrard was the angst-ridden, white, male, good guy (and a Benalish Captain, which landed him squarely in the white camp in the game). Yawgmoth's demons, along with Crovax, Greven, Volrath, and so on, were always depicted on black cards.

The story team wanted to get away from this old-fashioned white versus black conflict and make the story more about the conflicts as set up on the **Magic** color wheel. But, as Rob King says, "It was never our intention to discount what had come before. But the dichotomy of white versus black doesn't epitomize **Magic**. The color wheel is **Magic**, and a good versus evil story misses the richness of the color wheel. We wanted to do a conflict that builds on that richness."

Here is how Scott McGough remembers it: "We had extensive conversations at the Story Team level to determine the nature of each color, and we wanted to avoid the simplistic 'black mana equals evil, white mana equals good' so we looked at the underlying nature of each color. At the time, we decided that 'evil' in **Magic** meant trying to disrupt the balanced color wheel in favor of one particular color . . . so Yawgmoth and his Phyrexians were 'evil' because they intended (both by thought and deed, even if they never expressed it that way) to make black the predominant (and in fact, only) color."



Blue also had its share of protagonists in the old story with Urza, Barrin, and Teferi, and blue had long ruled the Pro Tour scene, so it was decided that the main antagonist in the new world would come from the blue school. According to Vance Moore, "Blue had become too powerful in the game setting and the story line. By making blue the enemy we would hopefully restore balance." Now, blue in the Argon story document was dominated by an empire of merfolk mages (Cephalids would come later from R&D), and among the key words of the blue school were deception, confusion, diplomacy, and agenda. Thus was the first inkling of the character of Laquatas born.

The natural choice to stand against blue in the story was a character from the **Magic** color most diametrically opposed to blue -- red. This gave us what Scott called, "the natural hostility between a person of action and honor (a red warrior) versus a person of mind games and treachery." Barbarians seemed ideal because they are often depicted as honorable yet chaotic -- the perfect foil for blue's deception and control -- and barbarians are seen as men (or women) of action, and that's just what a story calls for in a protagonist.

Where To Go From Here?

Now, we needed to flesh out the plot of the story arc. The story team brought to the table the kernel of an idea about a powerful artifact that would attract a lot of powerful characters. Remember, this was going to be a world where artifacts are scarce and something as powerful as the Mirari unheard of in generations. At the time, it really didn't matter what the Mirari was or what it did. Scott stated, "The Mirari was always intended to be a slippery item that was too powerful to categorize right away, and that its nature would be revealed through its effect on those who had it and tried to use it."

We called it the "mirror of desires," not because it showed what a character truly wanted in his heart of hearts, but because it allowed us to show the absolute essence of a color when it gets corrupted by raw, unimaginable power. The idea, then, for the Odyssey Cycle, was to follow the Mirari around to each color's society and take a peek under the veil at what that color would devolve into when the Mirari entered the equation. It was a chase -- a journey -- not just across the continent of Otaria, but into the primal values of each color.

We already had the Cabal, the Order, and the merfolk empire at this point, and it became obvious that the Cabal would have control of the Mirari at the beginning, using it as a prize in the pits to further advance their agenda (mostly making money). In many ways, we see very early how all three of these colors are influenced by corruption. As Vance points out, "In the story, white, blue, and black are all organized. Green and red reflect chaos against a corrupted order."

But where should the Mirari go, and when should each color gain control of it? In the past, **Magic** novels tried to treat all five colors equally within each novel. We decided that to make this journey, we needed to concentrate on certain colors in certain books. So, the Odyssey Cycle becomes a journey around the color wheel. Scott sums it up best: "We knew we were going to follow the Mirari around the color wheel, and we decided that since our trilogy protagonist was red, the first colors to get it should be his enemy colors -- white and blue. Black was the 'kingmaker,' so black would get it back at the end of book one, hold it through book two, and then red would have it for book three (and take it with him on an adventure through green)."

Much later, as R&D was working on the *Torment* design, they decided to create a black-heavy set based, at least partly, on the fact that the story for book two dealt mainly with black. In retrospect this may have been the truest break from tradition we made at that author summit. Never before, as far as I know, has the storyline of **Magic** had such a tremendous impact on the design of an entire set. So now we had a protagonist, an antagonist, and plot twists galore provided by a powerful, enigmatic artifact. What we needed next was a world within which the plot could unfold. Next time, I'll discuss the creation of Otaria and the politics of a new continent.



Go to the [books main news page](#) for more Wizards Book Publishing news or the **Magic: The Gathering** [novel page](#) for **Magic: The Gathering** novel features.

Send comments and questions to editor@wizards.com.