

## Onslaught: The Making of a Story (Part 3 of 3)

By Jess Lebow

Day three of the **Magic: The Gathering** author summit marathon started with a squish. Opening the third box of doughnuts I'd purchased in as many days (for those of you who wouldn't know this, I don't really eat doughnuts, so three dozen in three days is more than I've purchased in my entire lifetime), I grabbed out the Seattle equivalent of a Boston creme. (Purists would choke if they heard me use that name for this particular piece of cream-stuffed goodness. The pastry wasn't fluffy -- I would characterize it as soggy. The frosting wasn't delightful -- more like chocolate-colored sugar paste. And the creamy center wasn't light and creamy -- imagine vanilla pudding injected into a cream-colored balloon.) I took one bite, exposing the yellowish ooze that was its center, and the whole thing slipped out of my hand, falling from face level -- almost 6 feet from the ground -- onto the linoleum floor with a loud splat.

Has anyone ever studied this? Is there a law of nature that states that a slice of buttered toast, when dropped, will land on the buttered side? Or conversely, that a frosted doughnut, dropped from height, will land on the frosted side? Sir Isaac Newton must have had something to say on the subject.

In any case, you can just imagine the mess a deep-fried vanilla pudding bomb can make. I was picking bits of the filling out of my shoelaces for weeks.

"Nice choice of doughnuts, Rob," I said, scooping splattered pudding onto a paper plate with a handful of napkins.

"Nice hands, Jess," was all he said.

I deserved that.

"What if one of the new spells in the card set let you cast a shower of hot doughnuts down on your opponent?" I said, trying to cheer myself up.

"I'd be a red spell, I'd think," replied Rob. "Can you imagine the burns you'd get, pelted by hot bubbling piles of dough? They'd probably stick to your skin, too, continuing to burn until you scraped it off."

"And all that grease, too. Afterward, if you lived, you've have some serious puss-filled welts."

We laughed. Clearly, we'd been staring over the table at each other for too long.

In the previous two days, we'd talked about characters. Then we'd talked about heroes and villains. And then we'd talked about the color wheel. We'd even had a presentation from R&D about what concepts were on the table for the next three sets. (Translated: They were talking about these things *around the table* where they played **Magic** all day. I hate to break it to you, but there truly are people employed full time who do nothing more than play **Magic** all day long. If you'd like to apply, go here: [www.wizards.com/jobs](http://www.wizards.com/jobs).)

Now it was time to talk about how it was all going to come together.

Keep in mind that what we were trying to do here was to just create a skeleton, if you will, of a story. Down the line, Rob was going to have to take some creative license if he wanted to fill 960 pages (320 per novel). In fact, it would take him the better part of a year to write and rewrite these three novels. In total, he'd be racking up almost three hundred thousand words. Think about that. Over a quarter of a million words. If you counted the words in his outlines and the words he'd have to add or change in revision, he'd be near the half-mil mark. Maybe that's hard to put into perspective. Sure the number five hundred thousand sounds big, but just how big is it? You could probably put a half-million atoms on the head of pin, right? That's not so much. But five hundred thousand people would take up a lot of



space (about half of the city of Seattle).

In publishing, everything is done in word count, not pages. Remember the last time you had a five-page report due. If you were coming in short, you'd just change the font, or up the point size, or increase the leading (the space between the lines). You could probably make this column fit neatly onto five pages if you were creative enough. So using word count gives an editor a better idea of what he or she is dealing with in terms of space in a book. Still, let's make a few comparisons. The average short story in a *Wizards of the Coast* anthology is between five and ten thousand words. Your average paperback is around ninety thousand words. Your average cereal box has somewhere between two hundred and five hundred words (depending on whether or not you count the nutritional information). And I'm told, though this is not a hard and fast rule, that the average magazine page runs about eight hundred words. For the record, the article you are now reading is in the neighborhood of fifteen hundred words.

So, all of Rob's work on just these three **Magic** books translates into roughly three hundred and thirty-four articles about the same length as this one. That's like writing one almost every day.

Dang, that's a lot of work.

Given that Rob was going to make up most of the details along the way, what we needed to do on this last day was make sure he was going in the right direction. We had characters and conflict, but how were we going to put it all together?

We started answering that question by making another list of questions. Where would we start? Where would we end? How would we break up the overall story into three books?

The starting part was easy. We'd covered that in day one, but we needed to revisit it. We'd come a long way since then, and we had to check back and make sure all the decisions we'd made still worked for us. Looking back, we realized that starting exactly where we had left off in the last trilogy did suit our purposes. We entertained other thoughts about letting some time elapse first, but we didn't find any real advantage to doing that, so we stuck with our original plan.

Then we talked about where we wanted it to end. Two years ago, when we sat down and started thinking about Otaria, Kamahl (then called Brasskin), and the tale we were going to tell, we had decided to bite off enough material that we could sustain the story for two full years -- six **Magic** sets and the length of time that the first cards would remain tournament legal. Since the **Magic** universe is so dynamic and changes every four months, we needed a story that could keep pace but also last for a while. At that time, we had decided on an ending. I pulled out my old files and we took another look at it.

Unfortunately, that ending didn't work as well a full year later as it had when we sat down with our original ideas. Things had simply evolved to a higher level, and we needed to rework the ending. Now, I don't want you to get the idea that we completely scrapped what we had. We just needed to tinker with it a bit to make it more accurately represent the changes we had brought upon our characters and our continent.

So we spent most of the rest of the last day trying to answer this question. We started by -- (You didn't think I was going to actually tell you how it ends, did you?)

Once the ending was hammered out, we were left with dividing up the story among the three books. Obviously the beginning is in the first book and the ending in the last, but it's more complicated than that. In general, the first two books need to end on some sort of a cliffhanger. You want to give the readers a reason to read on, and the suspense it creates can be very satisfying if the mystery ends in the beginning of the next book. But, in addition to this, you have to make sure each book has its own conflict that gets resolved.

What you have then is both a story that plays out over the course of the trilogy and also three shorter stories that take place completely within the pages of their respective books. In the *Onslaught* cycle, the story we had developed, based on the growth of our characters, had a natural three-act movement to it. Either subconsciously or by blind luck we had done this final job along the way.

And that was it. We were done.

It was a Friday, and we were exhausted.

"One last beer for the road?" I asked, pushing the heavy box of gut bombs into the garbage.

"Only if it goes well with my cigar."

So we headed for the pub.

If you haven't already read it, go out right now and pick up a copy of J. Robert King's latest **Magic** novel, [Legions](#), which is in stores now.

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