

Our ever-changing creative process

The Story of the Story

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How is the storyline for the Magic cards created? Do you invent the storyline, characters, and plots and then make up cards for it? Or make up the cards and then a story for them? How exactly do these two things coincide?

-- Zachary Porcu, CA

Good questions, Zachary, with complicated answers -- too complicated for the "Ask Wizards" feature, so I'll respond in the form of a short article.

All kinds of models for creating cool settings, characters, and plots have been tried before. For the first core sets, there were no characters, no story, and no unified setting. But the cards had "flavor" because their mechanics represented magic or powers in a fantasy world (such as flying, trample, or protection). Wizards found out the hard way, though, that representing a fantasy world on cards only takes you so far, maybe a thousand cards. When R&D started coming up with more abstract mechanics that didn't really have a connection to a fantasy world (such as buyback, echo, or cycling), we had to try some new approaches. In general, the early sets were given to a couple of writers who had free reign creatively, and each group tried something a little different. The *Antiquities* set, for example, told shreds of the Brothers' War story, but in a purposely incomplete way. The *Legends* set had no story or setting, but its creators tried to have each Legend card tell its own little story. *The Dark* set was artist-driven and had no story, setting, or characters -- just randomly cool cards with a loose common theme.



Starting with the *Fallen Empires* set, Wizards assigned some people to create a richer background for sets. These attempts were generally "card-centric," however. The idea was to create only enough story to provide cool, evocative names and flavor text. This model was used for the *Ice Age*, *Alliances*, *Mirage*, and *Visions* sets. The *Homelands* set was an exception: two writers came up with a full story, then worked very closely with R&D to implement that story on cards. It was the first and last time that the creative staff had lots of influence on the design of individual cards.

Next came the grand experiment: the *Weatherlight* saga. This was Wizards' first attempt to use story to grow the **Magic** game into something bigger than just cards (for example, **Pokémon** and **Yu-Gi-Oh** have TV shows, toys, games, and so on, even though the **Magic** game predates them both). But different groups of people within Wizards had different ideas about what an overarching **Magic** storyline should be like, and there were some intense disagreements and changes in leadership between the *Weatherlight* set and the *Urza's Saga* set. In the meantime, we had found it difficult -- maybe even damaging to the game -- to try to tell a complex story with only cards. Players couldn't figure out the order in which plot events were supposed to be happening, and many just weren't interested in the *Weatherlight* crew. When *The Duelist* magazine published a storyboard of the *Tempest* plot using card illustrations alone, lots of people loved it, but without it, the story couldn't be easily told, and that frustrated many players.



Around the time of the *Urza's Legacy* set, responsibility for creating a compelling story for the **Magic** brand was given to Wizards' book-publishing department. The idea was that one or more novelists would create a story that we would flesh out and hint at on cards, and then tell fully in novels. That model was used for the remainder of the *Urza* block, as well as for the *Masques*, *Invasion*, *Odyssey*, and *Onslaught* blocks. But it became increasingly apparent to those working on cards that the needs of a novel were so different from those of cards that a novel wasn't a sufficient basis for the creative end of cards. Novels focus on creating interesting characters, and more importantly, interesting interactions between characters.

They also require plot events, which in turn affect the characters, often changing them in some way. Cards, on the other hand, require characters that don't really change, and cards can't communicate plot or character interactions very well at all. Moreover, cards require all kinds of details that novels just don't care about. For example, let's say a **Magic** novel is set in a city with lots of treachery and political machinations. Making the novelist describe at least a dozen different forest monsters would be completely pointless and damaging for the novel, but it's essential information for the corresponding card set.

Finally, we arrive at the present day. We would still like the **Magic** game to grow beyond the cards, but we know that the cards are its heart and soul. The first priority of all our creative efforts is to create cool cards. Here's our current approach: Start with a Big Idea. Maybe R&D would like to do a block that's all about the graveyard. Or maybe the creative staff would like to do a block set in an underwater civilization (yeah, right). The initial idea can come from either side. Once an idea is agreed on, R&D starts designing cards, and the creative staff develops a setting -- a world that grows from that idea. These two things happen simultaneously, and there's a lot of interplay between the two processes (the more, the better). Sometimes we'll develop a few characters and a very basic idea about a story plot while we're building the world, but that's secondary to creating a rich setting.

Once the world is developed enough, novelists are brought in to write books set in that world. But the cards don't have to try to tell that story. They just describe the world, its monsters, its civilizations, its magic, and so on. In short, the Big Idea drives the world, and the



world and the Big Idea work together to drive the cards first, then the novels and everything else.

Here's another way to think about it: In this new approach we're trying, my job is to lead a handful of writers and artists to create a world that will yield cool cards. Once that world is fleshed out enough for cards, we're able to hand it off to any other creative folks (such as novelists, illustrators, and so on) and say, "Here's the world you're in. Explore it however you want."

You'll see the fullest results of this approach in October when the *Mirrodin* set hits the shelves. I can't wait to see what you think of it.

Other Storyline Resources and Links

- [Magic Multiverse Storyline Home Page](#)
- [Storyline Summaries Page](#)
- [Magic Books Home Page](#)
- www.MagicInvasion.com

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