

Designing the vast setting of Kamigawa

A Series of Fortunate Events: Kamigawa World Design

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March 2005 will mark eight years of Wizards service for me. *Eight years*. Have you done *anything* every day for eight years besides use the toilet? Don't you have to be frickin' *insane* to do anything for that long?

This comes to mind because I realized that it was a full three years ago when, during a chat with my boss at the time, I said I wanted to try my hand at card design. I had edited and proofread **Magic**, I had done technical writing for it, I had playtested it, named and wrote flavor text for it, managed its rules . . . I wanted to see what it was like to design cards.



Be careful what you wish for. (Okay, this is worthy of a tangent: As I typed that last sentence, a cloud of about 200 crows swooped toward me right outside the window next to my desk like a dark omen. Every autumn, an obscene number of crows gather around the Wizards office at dusk, swooping around, perching on rooftop ledges. It really gets you in the Halloween spirit. I'm told it has something to do with the plant down the street that makes fertilizer out of fish guts.)

In mid-2002, around the time that development of the *Mirrodin* set was in full swing, folks in R&D started talking in earnest about Earth (regular readers will remember that the codenames for the *Kamigawa* block were Earth, Wind, and Fire). Bill Rose had a big idea: he wanted to do a set in which flavor was at least as important as mechanics, maybe more so. I was instructed to think about whether a particular kind of world or flavor would really knock players' socks off, would excite them as much as some new mechanics.

Back to Reality

At the same time, Bill started getting fond of a particular idea: He wanted to try doing a **Magic**block that would take place in a world with which players were already familiar. *Mirrodin* was cool, but it was very “high concept,” and it really pushed the limits of what “fantasy” means. The only constant in **Magic** is change, so Bill thought maybe we should follow up a strange world with a familiar one. He also thought that doing a setting based on an Earth mythology would inspire card designers because they'd have a flavor basis from which to work.



Grid Monitor art by Arnie Swekel

I won't lie to you — I disliked the whole idea. I didn't want to go where other games had already been, and neither did art director Jeremy Cranford. We were proud of *Mirrodin*, and we knew our illustrators were excited to illustrate our metal world. We wanted to keep going in new directions, and a real-world-inspired setting felt like a step backward. But, see, there's this thing: Bill Rose is the vice president of R&D. He tends to get his way.

As Mark Rosewater alluded to in his article “[Now With Added Flavor](#),” I evaluated lots of Earth mythologies in an attempt to construct a short list of promising candidates for Bill. Greek? Too mundane, and we have already incorporated a lot of mythical Greek monsters into **Magic**. Celtic? Aztec? Sumerian? Too obscure. They could be cool, but the vast majority of players wouldn't be familiar with them, thereby defeating the purpose of doing a real-world-based setting in the first place. Suffice it to say that the eventual list was short, alright. Like four items short. Bill had found one real-world mythology particularly appealing, but there were some complications. (No, I won't tell you which, because we'll likely revisit the idea in the future.) Then something formative occurred. He attended a distributors' meeting in Tokyo, Japan. When he came back, he had all but made up his mind that we would create a setting based on Japanese mythology.



Respecting Japan

Over the next several days, I identified some challenges and problems with a Japanese-inspired setting. First and foremost, Japan doesn't have a mythology per se, if by "mythology" you mean a pantheon of no-longer-worshipped gods. There's folklore, of course, but all the "old gods" of Japan are still very much alive in Shinto and Buddhism. In other words, what would be considered mythology in the ancient Greek or Norse culture is current religious practice in Japanese culture.

Second, many Westerners just don't know much about ancient and/or feudal Japan beyond samurai and ninja. Ask a typical American to name some elements of a Japanese-inspired fantasy setting, and they'll name samurai, ninja, Eastern dragons, "honor," maybe some medieval Japanese weapons . . . and that's about it. And maybe they'll throw in some random Chinese stuff, too.

Which brings me to the third problem: Many Westerners confuse Chinese or Korean cultural elements with Japanese, or worse, they don't think the differences are significant. I felt very strongly that we shouldn't do an Asian mishmash setting. To me, putting kung fu or Sun Tzu into a Japan-inspired setting is no different from creating a Babylonian-flavored setting and then populating it with Vikings.



The last major problem also derives from the second one: **Magic** is a game about creatures and spells, and yet most Westerners simply aren't familiar with the creatures and magic of Japanese lore. Using words like "tengu," "kappa," "oni," "shugendo," and "onmyodo" will usually get you blank stares. And to make matters worse, the creatures of Japanese folklore are bizarre and complex, and many just won't fit neatly into **Magic's** five colors or its values.

Take tengu, for example, which are a major feature of Japanese folklore. Depending on what you read, they're either long-nosed goblins or bird-men. They're either honorable duelists or perverted tricksters. They're forest dwellers, or maybe mountain dwellers. Now pick a color for these creatures. They're sort of goblins, so they're red. They're bird-men, so they're white or blue (like Aven). They're forest dwellers, so they're green. And in addition to all these complications, Westerners aren't familiar with them anyway.

Rosewater's Mantra

If you've read, say, two of Mark's columns, you know that he believes that restrictions aid creativity. I think this is correct (most of the time), and it was definitely true with Kamigawa design. The first restriction came from Bill: This setting had to be Japan-inspired. The next batch of restrictions came from me: (1) Do a Japanese setting unlike any other. (2) Be respectful of Japanese culture by doing your homework and avoiding stereotypes. (3) Stay true to **Magic** by always keeping the five colors and the need for badass creatures in sight.

As I read more and more Japanese folklore, some patterns began to emerge. The first was transformation—things that seemed like one thing but were actually another, or things that actually became other things. As Mark wrote in "[Flipping Out](#)," this theme would become the basis for the "night/day" mechanic, and would eventually end up on the "hero" cards.

This pattern dovetailed nicely with another one: In Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan, everything has a divine essence, a kami. And often, when a monster such as a giant centipede or a humungous underground catfish (yes, really) or a dragon appeared in folk tales, it was referred to as a divinity, a kami. This would become the answer to our creature problem. The bizarre, badass creatures of Kamigawa wouldn't just be monsters. They would be divinities of all shapes, sizes, and colors. They would be gods.

So a kind of accident led to the solution of multiple problems. If kami are the creatures of this world, why are they fighting? This question led to the "Shinto gone wrong" concept, which is the feature of Kamigawa that separates us from all other Japan-inspired settings. But what about the familiarity goal that started us on this path in the first place? That's why we would also include all the elements of medieval Japan with which Western players *are* familiar: samurai, katana, ryuu/tatsu (dragons), and so on. And with bizarre kami on one hand and feudal Japanese social roles on the other, the Kami War was born.



Night of Souls' Betrayal art by Greg Staples

Beyond Humanity

The final piece came from another one of my self-imposed restrictions. I think **Magic** should be about cool creatures, not just humans. That's why although humans appear in all five colors, they're outnumbered by other kinds of creatures in each color. So we needed other humanoids to round out the material world. And we wanted these humanoids to represent both Japanese myths and **Magic**.

Foxes, *kitsune*, were an easy choice, because they're such a tremendously important feature of Japanese folklore. The real question was, given the richness and variety of fox stories, what color should they be? That question was answered by Alexander O. Smith, a freelance writer who has done a lot of research on fox stories. He was fascinated by the stories in which foxes were mysteriously benevolent, aiding humans in need or in peril. This image, like the four below it, is one of the concept sketches done for us by Ittoku.



The blue humanoid choice came from one of my favorite Japanese tales, the story of Lady Kaguya (sometimes called "The Bamboo Cutter and the Moon Maiden"). In this story, a simple peasant finds a tiny woman inside a bamboo stalk, and she grows to become the most beautiful woman in Japan. But

the night before she is to be courted by the *mikado* himself, strange celestial beings descend in chariots from the moon and take her "home." Thus the moonfolk were created.



Black was easy, because rats are both a **Magic** staple and a fixture of Japanese lore. Also, we wanted to avoid undead, since they blur the line of division between kami and living creatures.



Red was harder. As I mentioned above, Japanese folklore has goblins, but we wanted Kamigawa's goblins to look different from the silly, long-nosed *tengu* in the real-world lore. We got our answer when one of our concept illustrators, Ittoku, drew his version of a goblin. He had taken a kappa, a turtle-like river spirit, and envisioned the goblins as "fire kappa."



Of all the humanoid races, we were most stumped in green. I had asked early on that elves be left out of the setting entirely, because they have no equivalent in Japanese lore. I thought another creature from the folklore might serve as a basis—the tanuki, or raccoon-dog—but the tanuki stories are all bawdy and comical. Tanuki are often represented as drunk and lusty, with oversized private parts and whatnot. Not appropriate for **Magic**. Then, during the very first day our concept-illustration team met as a group, Ittoku showed a sketch of a four-armed snake shinobi he had been working on. I immediately asked if we could use it, and work started on developing the orochi.



But What About the *Cards*?

As you can see, Kamigawa's creative infrastructure was part research and part accident. And because it developed over the course of months—months during which card design was supposed to be ongoing—the process of coming up with cards and mechanics was even more chaotic than usual. Each design-team member had a different interest and focus.

Brian Tinsman, the team lead, was interested in thinking about spells as supernatural martial arts moves. He was also focused on designing common cards. As I would later learn, designing good common cards is much harder and less fun than designing uncommon and rare cards, because commons have to be simpler, more nuts-and-bolts, more elegant. If it's wacky (and I prefer wacky cards), chances are very good it's not common.

I was busy trying to design a keyword mechanic for combat. I can't be too specific in case we use any of my ideas in future sets, but some of the mechanics I designed were "overawe," "bladework,"

“finesse,” “fealty,” “taunt,” “fury,” . . . there were about 20 in all. (Sadly, the bushido ability we chose in the end wasn't one of my designs.) I was also slaving away on commons.

Mike Elliott was working on what he does best: abstract mechanics (the ones without super-definable flavor such as echo and cycling). His work would eventually yield soulshift. Mike was also doing some combat-keyword design.

In the meantime, Bill (a busy guy by any measure) was overseeing our efforts, shaping the common-card designs and weighing in on the ideas we produced and whether they would yield good cards and good gameplay or not. He contributed material of his own, as well.

The last piece of the Kamigawa puzzle wouldn't come until months later, and it became a real lynchpin of the design: legendary creatures. But that story is worth an article in and of itself.

And the Moral of the Story Is . . .

Do what the vice-president of R&D tells you to do. No, wait, that's not it. Have you ever heard that the words for “crisis” and “opportunity” are the same word in Japanese? Well even though that's not true, Kamigawa is a great example of how challenges can lead you to places better than where you would've ended up otherwise.

When we began the world design for what was then Earth, Wind, and Fire, I hadn't the slightest inkling that I would become reasonably knowledgeable about Shinto, or that I'd be trying to talk the creative team into using the word “kishinsuhaisha” in a card title. And I definitely wouldn't have guessed that we'd produce a set with more legendary creatures than *Legends*. But hey, accidents happen, and I hope you enjoy the way we dealt with them.