

The naming of cards is a difficult matter. Say My Name

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Mr. A: We need a name for this burn spell.
Mr. B: How about [Lightning Blast](#).
Mr. A: That sounds good. How about this green creature that gets bigger?
Mr. B: [Dirtcowl Wurm](#) sounds smooth.
Mr. A: Yeah. Wurms are cool. These trees are cool too, they help us think of great stuff for green cards.
Mr. B: Yeah, and they make a great shady place to stop for a little respite.
Mr. A: Dude! [Respite](#), that's a great name. Chalk that one up!
Mr. B: We should have the rest of these done by the time we get to that [natural spring](#).
Mr. A: Dude, you're on a roll!

Naming Cards Is No Walk In The Park

This is a fantasyland re-enactment of how **Magic** cards are named. The *real* process of Magic card naming is not a seat-of-the-pants, done-by-lunch process. As a matter of fact, we have just recently wrapped up the naming process for *Ravnica, City of Guilds*, and it took six months to complete. Six months! There is a lot more to it than "this sounds cool" and "that sounds smooth."

A Magic card name has to be run through the gauntlet before it finds a home on a card. It is like an obstacle course, with each name running into editing hurdles, game-play pitfalls, and Magic brand policy mud-pits. And while the names are trying their best to stay in bounds, they are doing so with all the word flair and phonetic panache they can muster. It's like a cross between an obstacle course and a high bar routine, and each and every name has to make it through.

The "rules" that Magic names follow are, like all rules in Magic, expected to be broken at times. "Guideline" is probably a better term. Most of these guidelines are related to the **function** of a Magic card. How does the name affect game play? Is the name appropriate for the Magic audience? Is the name too difficult for players to pronounce?

When a "rule" is broken, it is most likely due to **formal** characteristics that are overwhelmingly cool. Formal coolness comes from creative word choice, rhythm, rhyme, and other flair-forming techniques. Though form rarely trumps function, most of the great Magic names do perform some sort of formal wizardry. Following the guidelines may be the most important obstacle a name must over

come **to win the top left corner of a Magic card**, but style and artistry are necessary **to capture the hearts and minds of Magic players**.

I am going to take you along for the ride as I run two guinea pig cards through the card naming obstacle course. This simulation of the card naming process will be an amalgamation of many issues that have arisen during the creation of thousands of Magic cards.

I will stop and explain many of the functional hurdles that the names must clear and the formal techniques they use while hurdling. From their embryonic play-test form to their final homes on Magic cards, we will see the evolution of two Magic card names.



Here are the two contenders, in their initial playtest form. Each playtest card has a temporary placeholder name. Card designers [create the placeholder names](#), though only some make an effort to create names that can run the gauntlet and actually end up on the printed card, as [Doubling Cube](#) did in *Fifth Dawn*. In this case, both "Mountain Man" and "Lavablade" seem good enough to begin the process. (Professor Hill and Red-hot Poker would have been too jocular to warrant any real consideration.)

At first glance, I see that both of these placeholder names have some formal flair. Let's look at what they're doing well before we put them through the rules ringer. I immediately take note of many many Ms and Ns in Mountain Man. That's alliteration, Homes!

All About Alliteration

Mountain Man makes good use of alliteration, a word-smithing tool that has been used in Magic names since the beginning. Alliteration is defined as: *"The repetition of the same sounds or of the same kinds of sounds at the beginning of words or in stressed syllables."* Alliteration gives a name a slogan-like memorable quality; *"[Meddling Mage](#)- More mage for your mana."* Some other examples of alliteration are [Sustaining Spirit](#), [Avenging Angel](#), and the cards of the "Words of" cycle; [Words of War](#), [Words of Worship](#), etc. Mountain Man and [Avenging Angel](#) work it at the beginning *and* middle of their words, (**M**ountainman, **A**vinging **A**ngel) giving their alliterative efforts extra emphasis.

Names without alliteration are obviously not disqualified, but names with it have been consistently winning spots on cards. Though I have not researched it thoroughly, I would bet there are alliterative names in every Magic set.

Pyromancer's Dart does not alliterate, but it does amalgamate. Magic cards have been intelligently (and sometimes not-so-intelligently) combining English, Latin, Greek and other word roots to create its own fantasy world words that still resonate with real world meaning.

A + B = Seaswift

Though it may seem completely at home and believable in the Magic world, Lavablade is not a "real" word. But we're not playing Monopoly here, we're playing a game where we are mighty mages slinging spells – we need our own special words. What a magic card name cannot do, however, is be unintelligible. This is why the A + B = Seaswift technique has been used hundreds and hundreds of times. If we understand the meaning of A (Sea) and B (Swift) we can assume the meaning of the made-up [Seaswift](#) will be somewhat accessible. Lavablade successfully combines "lava" and "blade" into a word that sounds cool and conjures up the image of a molten magic weapon. That's hot. Just picking off the top of my head, here are some other Magic names that follow this little word equation: [Anurid Brushhopper](#), [Frightcrawler](#), [Sandskin](#), [Darksteel Colossus](#), [Ebonblade Reaper](#), [Shadowmage Infiltrator](#), [Necropotence](#), and the list goes on....

Well, it seems like we're off to a good start with these two cards. Each one has done a pirouette or two to wow the judges. Unfortunately, it is all for naught. While these two names may have the crowd roaring, the judges are going to disqualify them for stepping over the line. Mountain Man and Lavablade each break functional guidelines. Let's look at their infractions before we bid them farewell.

Magic cards are little ambassadors for the game, each carrying with it the goals and values of the Magic brand. One of these values is avoiding gender exclusivity, bias, or stereotype.

Is That A Boy Bulvox A Girl Bulvox?

The correct answer is; it is either one. "Mountain Man," similar to [Flying Men](#) or [Pikemen](#), suggests that all creatures represented by this card are male. Mountain Man's infraction seems even more severe, since animated rock would not have sexuality of any kind. Using this name would suggest that the Magic brand has chosen to have the gender default of *all* creatures be male. Unacceptable.



Equally unacceptable is the use of the "-ess" words, sorceress, ogress, priestess, and...er...enchantress. (OK, enchantress has built up so much momentum and popularity that it has overpowered the editors. As I said, the rules are made to be broken) These words are unnecessary, as each only erroneously reinforces some difference between the function of a male priest/sorcerer/ogre/enchanter and a female one. The current Magic team does not believe only female Hasran Ogres stab their own controllers, just like we do not believe a male [Norwood Priest](#) would be incapable of bringing green creatures into play for free. Magic has chosen to bear the responsibility of trying to foster an environment of gender equality. In the Magic world, women and men shall kick equal ass. The old fantasy damsels in distress have no place in Magic anymore. And so there is no place for Mountain Man.

As it turns out, there may be no place for Lavablade either – at least not on this card. As I think about Lavablade more, it starts to seem less like something I do and more like something I use. There are two functional guidelines that are concerned with what Lavablade is doing. One, **Card Characteristic Confusion**, I will deal with later. For now, let us explore the wonders of verbs.

"In Response, I [VERB] Your Zombie."

(A little related side-note before we continue. Anytime you see a word in brackets, such as [VERB], it is our way of indicating that we have not yet decided on what word or words will go in the brackets. Notice the brackets around the card names above – they indicate that these names are just holding spots for the names we ultimately choose to put there.)

The "[VERB] rule" applies to the many targeted sorcery and instant spells that will most often be used by players saying, "I [[Shock](#) / [Bolt](#) / [Dismiss](#) / [Banish](#) / [Terminate](#)] that." We try to keep the targeted spells that will be used often within the "[VERB] your guy" model. Over the course of the game's history, Magic has invented its own sketchy verbs. While **Terroring** and **Swordsing** are common occurrences in Magic duels, they are, in fact, not actual words. While we encourage players to form their own gaming vernacular, we also

like to encourage educated, intelligent gaming. Thus, "[VERB] You" is applied when possible. "In response, I Lavablade your zombie." It's not horrible, but it's not the greatest either. Our correctness barometers have been damaged by all the "Demise-ing" and "Salve-ing" and "Lace-ing". In the end, I think Lavablade sounds cool enough to be on a card, but not this one. A quick pinger card like this is going to see a lot of play and we'd like it to roll off the tongue more easily and intelligently.

And so ends the reign of the Placeholder names. For alternatives, we turn to the team of writers that is assembled to work on each card set. For each card, a list of potential names is created. Here is what we see:

[Mountain Man]
Rubble Forces
Earthen Warrior
Walking Stone
Magmathron
Stonebones

[Lavablade]
Electrocute
Ping
Hero Fyst
Pyromancer's Touch

The usual process is to take the one we like the most and let it ride until an issue arises that precludes us from using it. Let's start out by choosing my favorite: Rubble Forces.

Rubble Forces performs a little pirouette of punnery that I enjoy. Old sayings and clichés have reared their ugly heads in Magic cards for years. Some of them go down in flames, like Dead Ringers and Need for Speed. Duds. Many, however, make use of the memorable cliché to create fun, and often multi-layered, names.

The New, Improved Old Cliché!

Magic names that reference common real-world sayings cash in on phrases that are already ingrained in our memories, but usually do so with some twist that makes it apply to the Magic realm. Rubble Forces plays on the commonly used phrase, Rebel Forces. (Interestingly, it would have lost none of its luster as Pebble Forces!) It cashes in on a familiar tandem of words, while adding in a little twist that makes it work as a Magic name. Mountain Man also used the old cliché to its advantage. "Mountain man" is commonly used to describe a bearded, Grizzly Adams sort of guy. A Magic Mountain Man is not from the mountains, he *IS* the mountain!

Organ Grinder and Think Tank are actual Magic cards that ran the gauntlet pushing the old cliché. An organ grinder cranks a music box, while Organ Grinder literally grinds bodily organs. Think tanks are groups that gather to do research. Magic's Think Tank does this, while adding in the literal meaning of "tank;" a holding cell for aquatic animals (Cephalids). Other examples of this are Deep Analysis, Grave Consequences, Grizzly Fate, Squee's Toy, and many others – fun stuff, all of them.

Rubble Forces is a catchy little knee-slapper, but it does not make it past its first obstacle: matching the art.



Art-zilla Meets Mech-a-name

At some point early in the process, sketches for the card art start streaming in. Once they are in, we must pay attention to what is going on so we can make sure the name, art, and mechanics do not clash. There are plenty of examples of this creative trinity in combat, just look at [Hyalopterous Lemure](#). The card was named "Lemure" but the [art came in](#) as a "Lemur," but it slipped through the cracks. We try not to let the monkeys slip by anymore. So the sketch comes in for [Mountain Man] and it shows a single figure of smooth, living stone rising from the earth. Cool. But, this does not quite match up with Rubble (piles of broken rock and refuse) or Forces (multiple people fighting for a cause.) There might be some debate over whether or not we let this one slide because Rubble Forces makes us chuckle. In the end, it is decided that the pun in Rubble Forces might not be noticed by enough people, and therefore does not carry enough weight to justify breaking consistency with the art. Brief moments of lamentation, then we move on.

The consensus favorite for [Lavablade] is Ping. It's snappy, and fits the "[VERB] you" model. I like it quite a bit because it *looks* like a little card that does 1 damage.

Packaging The Name

Some Magic cards do a good job at what I call "Packaging" the name. These are the cards whose names reflect the scope of the card. [Fog](#) does a great job of packaging the spell in a very small box. Its tiny, three letter name reflects the tiny 1 mana cost of the spell, as well as the one-liner in the text box. "Ping" works this way too. It's a snappy spell with a snappy effect and a snappy little name.

All well packaged cards are not packaged small. [Myojin of Infinite Rage](#), for example, packages itself in a much bigger box. The name is a mouthful and it reflects a bloated casting cost of $7\text{ }2\text{ }2\text{ }2$ and a text box with almost 50 words! My favorite example of a well

packaged card does not get delivered until *Ravnica* is released – its name befits the card's text while also *literally* reflecting the card's ability, mana cost, and flavor text. A doozy! Ping starts to gather some momentum. The play-testers are loving it as "pinging" stuff rolls so effortlessly off their tongues. Ironically, "ping" rolls off too effortlessly and ultimately rolls right off the table onto the cutting room floor.

Don't Use The Magic Word

This rule, much like the strike zone in baseball, has a clear definition, but is enforced in varying degrees. What it means is that Magic card names should not contain words that reside elsewhere on Magic cards or in common Magic game play lingo (unless they are *Unglued* or *Unhinged* cards, in which case they are absolute gold!). Using keywords (flanking, phasing, first strike) or game play lingo (tap, `tings, topdeck) in a name would break the fantasy illusion of Magic and reel us back into the reality of just playing a game. Crossing this line just slightly, "ping" is a word commonly used for effects that do one damage to a target. In fact, it was used by me while discussing the "[VERB] you" rule. There have been cases in the past that break this rule, like [Counterspell](#), [Flash Counter](#), [Magnetic Mountain](#), and the [Blue](#) and [Red Elemental Blast](#) spells. The "counter" spells break the rule threefold, with "counter" being the definitive game play word for stopping a spell, and counters (+1/+1 and the like) are used on scads of cards, and "spell" being the descriptor for most of the cards we play. As you can probably tell, all of these are older cards. We would have to campaign hard with the editors to get a name like this to stick. In the case of Ping, it's not cool enough to warrant the extra work, so it's back to the list for another contender.

Electrocute! How did I miss that one? It's bold, it fits the "[VERB] you" rule nicely, and it's a highly recognizable word. These are all important because the play-testers like this card enough to consider it as a "Repeatable" or "Promotable" card.



Making The Most Of Vanilla

Repeatable cards are those that can be reprinted in later sets down the road. Promotable cards are those that can fit into the Nth Edition core sets. For those of us involved in naming, Repeatable carries a lot of weight. Repeatable names have to be cool enough to be worthy of multiple printings, but general enough to fit into any scenario. A good example of a non-repeatable name would be Genju of the Cedars. A Genju has no place in a world like Otaria, and Cedars do not exist in places like *Mirrodin*. Even though a land becoming a creature is cool enough to use in other sets, (hey, look at [Mountain Man]!) its name makes that impossible.

Repeatable and Promotable names are also important because they are not of infinite supply. We can come up with a near limitless number of damage spell names by adding in proper nouns and made-up words like Rotaga's Flame, or Blutarch's Flame, or Anyone's Flame. Quality generic words are not limitless and, therefore, must be hoarded for cards that are good enough to be Repeatable or Promotable. Magic history contains a bunch of names that we would love to have back for cards that actually deserve their good names - Jinx, Forget, Amnesia, Teleport, Reincarnation.

Electrocute fits the bill for repeatability and promotability. It's a word that sounds cool, but does not make any requirements of its world in order to make sense. Electrocute hops that hurdle and is streaking for the finish line.

But wait! There's a man on the track! He's one of the developers, and he grappled onto Electrocute, bringing it to a stop. Development has made some changes. Electrocute may no longer be appropriate.

When Develop Means "Make Worse," Not "Make Better"

The naming process is often thrown for a loop when the development team changes card mechanics. In the case of our two contenders, both of them have been powered down. Apparently, red is proving to be too strong, so some red cards have to be softened up. [Mountain Man] gets stripped from red entirely, and [Lavablade] is, well... made worse. In making it worse, the team no longer feels the card is cool enough to think Repeatable or Promotable, so we decide to put Electrocute on the shelf.

Things are starting to look a little sketchy for [Lavablade] and [Mountain Man]. I was thinking about putting Magmathron through its paces, but the change to the card mechanic now makes that name a bad fit.

Card Characteristic Confusion

Here's how [Mountain Man] looks now:

☉: Add one colorless mana to your mana pool.

⑥: [CARDNAME] becomes a 3/3 artifact creature permanently. (*This creature still counts as a land.*)

No reference to mountains or the color red now makes the "magma" in Magmathron seem a little off base. It is important for names to reflect the many characteristics of a card, like card color, card type, creature type, and art. Using Magmathron on this card might give subtle suggestion that this card has some tie to red, just as using Stonebones (also from the list) might trick players into thinking black. Cards like [Dark Maze](#) and [Fire and Brimstone](#) slipped by with similar color confusion.

Card *type* confusion has more quantifiable ramifications. Cards like [Lavablade] or [Hell Swarm](#) or [Snow Devil](#) can cause problems when in your hand (you may think [Lavablade] is a permanent) or when in play (you probably should think [Hell Swarm](#) is a creature.)

Creature type confusion is nearly as damaging, and important to avoid. [Angelic Page](#) is not an angel and [Zombie Master](#) is not a zombie. Earthen Warrior, from our list above, might create some confusion since it does not become a land that counts as a warrior. It may seem like a small transgression, but it is right there on the front line. The name is one of the first identifiers of a card, and we do everything we can to keep your initial impressions consistent with what the cards actually are.

And so spells the end for Magmathron. There's not much left to work with here. I could just trash the rest of these and get more suggestions from the creative folks who sit all around me. I could, but there are still some things to learn from the duds left on the list.

One such dud is Hero Fyst. Hero Fyst? Of course, this thing has no place on a Magic card, but I will elaborate on why it, and other cheese like it, should never see cardboard. First of all, that letter Y in fyst is sticking out like a sore thumb. Magic has never really been a home for the uber-fantasy spelling of words like phantasie and magicks. This rogue Y tips me off that Hero Fyst may be an anagram.

An Anagram Mangara Would Be Proud Of

Anagrams are the source of much discussion within the halls of Magic creative. Some believe anagrams have a place in the game, as little treasures to be sought out and discovered by players. Others believe they are a place to sneak in a little vanity press by jumbling up the name of a card designer's mom or baby boy. Right now, we have not come to any definable consensus on this subject. What I can say is that we are not actively seeding them in or weeding them out, but they crop up every once in a while when the conditions are right. In fact, there is a cycle of anagram-esque cards in Saviors of Kamigawa. They sort of snuck into the set because they use a word that has taken on a Magic life of its own and the fact that it is vanity press is hardly recognized anymore. Hero Fyst, on the other hand, is not so stealthy. It was snuck onto the list by one of the Magic designers, Aaron ([ForsytHe](#)). It was good for a laugh, but not for a card.

The jury is also out on non-personal anagrams, like [Mangara's Tome](#) (Mangara = anagram) or [Pemmin's Aura](#) (i Am suPerman.) They do give players secrets to be privy to and puzzles to solve, but they, too, do a little damage to the fantasy illusion. This damage may be small enough to be worth the bonus fun of discovering a Mr. Toilet ([Telim'Tor](#)). We'll have to wait and see how this debate pans out.

So we are down to Pyromancer's Touch (blah) and Walking Stone (double blah.) We are down on these names and in search of some help for them. When we need inspiration, we often find it in the art. At this point, it is late in the game and most of the final art has come in. Both [Mountain Man] and [Lavablade] are in.



Art by Stephen Daniele

Art by John Matson



D'oh! That guy is not "walking." Are those space ships? Where is the pyromancer? These will not do. Pyromancer's Touch will definitely not work, so we'll need some last-minute magic to come up with a winner. By now, you probably know where this one ends up. Someone in the room, perhaps even one of the editors or art directors, saves the day with the little 3-letter gem, Zap.

Spells Like It Sounds

What does it sound like when the *Weatherlight* fires a ray? Zap! This phonetic treat is called onomatopoeia. It means something reads like the sound that it makes. Like plop. Or Sizzle, or Skizzik, or Kaboom! It's a real bonus when we can get some onomatopoeics onto a card. It gives a Magic duel a little soundtrack. You can just hear the Clickslither ticking along the rocks with its bony toes, its slimy tail slithering behind – then you hear it get Zapped! Zap Spells Like it Sounds and is nicely Packaged in a tiny little red box. We wipe some sweat from the brow and move on to [Mountain Man.]



Walking Stone is not wowing anybody, but it's not offending anybody either. Then some play-testers start calling it "Walking Stoned." Once editing and the brand team get wind of this, discussion ensues.

Offensive Spells

That's Offensive, as in; "That offends me," and we try not to have spells that do this. Throughout history there have been some cards that have, either through slang or cultural translation, offensive connotations. [Stone-Throwing Devils](#), for example, turns out to be a terrible insult to Islamic people. We do as much as we possibly can with our translators to make sure things like this do not happen again. Another example of this is the [Shroom Dog]. This was the Placeholder name for [Mossgod](#). Late in the game, even though [Mossgod](#) has just about ZERO moss on it, and is covered in mushrooms, the name was struck down because of "shrooms"- slang for hallucinogenic drug, mushrooms. Smooth segue into Walking Stone(d). Some argue that "stone" is such a common word (used on almost 70 other Magic cards) that it should slide. It is not shot down. Yet. In all the hubbub over "stone" no one noticed that there was already a finalized card in the set called "Walking Dream." Will the hurdles ever end???

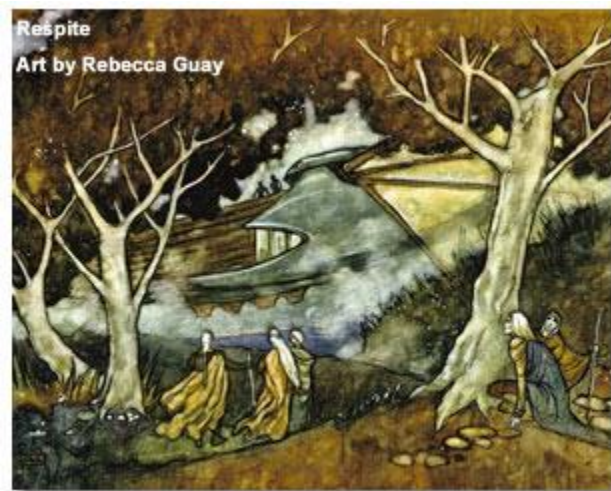
Don't Step On My Toes

Magic card names do not live in a vacuum. They do not even live in the present. They actually live in the present and the past at the same time. More than anything, a Magic card name is there to set it apart from the other cards with which it is played. Each name has to keep a good distance from other card names that sound similar or use the same words. This is a tall order, since 5000 unique names burn a lot of word bridges.

The "Walking" issue is an important one. Two spells with no relation to each other at all starting with the same word in the same set would be a mistake. Players could get the two of them mixed up in play or in conversation about their decks. Of course, we cannot horde words forever. We can, however, mind the names within a set, or the one that comes before it. There are a couple examples of times when we were not minding the store; [Clickslither](#) and [Quick Sliver](#) were in the same set. Try saying that three times fast. Also, [Dreams of the Dead](#), [Dance of the Dead](#), and [Drift of the Dead](#) were all in *Ice Age*. That's a lot of D's and a lot of Deads. Given the importance of distinguishing non-related spells, Walking Stones is now hobbling.

Someone in the creative department applies the Miyagi Grip and says "Stabbing Stone!" No more "Walking," and alliteration to boot! We all breathe a sigh of relief. Could it be that we are finally ready to head for the [Natural Spring](#) for a little [Respite](#)? Hey, what is that hurdle doing here on this path through the park?

It is now past the date when all names are considered final and passed along to the editors and templating team. This *should* be the part where we relax under a shade tree for a bit of well-earned relaxation. But it is not. The editors and templating team have all begun to hate Stabbing Stones. (The s was added to the end as an attempt to dissuade the addition of a D.) "The creature cannot stab you; he has no knife!" they exclaim. In our



excitement over dodging the "Walking" issue, we ran right into Art-zilla. Now things get really rough, because the card set has already gone to templating and collector numbers are assigned.

Git In Where Ya' Fit In

Collector numbers reflect the order in which the cards appear in the set. The cards progress alphabetically and are numbered from 1 to 286 (or whatever the number of cards in that set is). White cards go first, then blue, black, red, green, artifacts, and land. This makes **Stabbing Stones** the pickle in the middle alphabetically between **Skyshroud Forest** and **Swamp**. We cannot use "Stabbing," but we have to somehow wedge our word in between **Skysi** and **Swamo**. A well-known Magic card name was hatched in similar circumstances. **Spectral Lynx** ran most of the gauntlet as "Spirit Lynx," a little naming nod to **Spirit Link**. It got the axe late in the game because the editors were worried that people would assume it had the **Spirit Link** ability. This put the little kitty squeezed in between **Soul Link** and **Spiritmonger**, but the creative folks found a good name that fit in. And we have to do the same for [Mountain Man.] Most of you probably know how this pickle ends up sliced. **Stalking Stones** is discovered and all rejoice! Now, finally, there is a little time for a well-earned respite.

While **Stalking Stones** and **Zap** were not actually born of these exact circumstances, they served well as demonstrators for the collective rigors that their Magic card kin must survive in order to be enshrined on cardboard. As I said at the beginning, the naming process can last as long as six months, and is no walk in the park. If you come across names that you feel are lame, think first about all of the obstacles involved in naming before you judge us. We name close to 700 cards a year, and each one has to pass the test. Some may break rules or cut corners here and there, and others may come out at the other end looking pretty ragged. All things considered, I think the creative team, folks in R&D, and the writers consistently come up with fantastically inspiring names that make us happy to play with and collect our little cardboard wonders. If you disagree, or you want to give us a little pat on the back for a job well done, we are listening. Hop over to the message boards and tell us what's up.