

Tales from the Planar Chaos flavor text team. Flavor From the Chaos

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Tahngarth is a whiner. As a particularly strong, self-confident, and conceited member of the Talruum minotaur tribe, perhaps he is only acting as you'd expect. And as one of red alignment, it's natural that he doesn't think very highly of those who can be summoned into being with mana drawn from memories of islands. When the Weatherlight began dealing with the Vodalian merfolk, having Tahngarth involved was like mixing [Tivadar](#) and goblins. No good could come of it.



And it didn't. As is plainly evidenced by flavor text in the set *Weatherlight*, particularly [Phantom Warrior](#), [Tolarian Serpent](#), and [Vodalian Illusionist](#), Tahngarth was less than pleased by the merfolk. As a long time player, those pieces stuck in my memory. Perhaps there was something about this huge minotaur and his temper (observe his reasoned calm on the flavor text of [Benalish Missionary](#)) that struck me as amusing or distinctive. So, when one of the "timeshifted" cards we were presented with in *Planar Chaos* was a fishy riff on [Dwarven Thaumaturgist](#), my mind immediately flew back to Tahngarth and his complaints about merfolk. Surely the vain Tahngarth would have something to say about merfolk with the power to affect their foes physically, perhaps in a mildly ironic way that would foreshadow what Volrath would do to him later (at least in our timeline)?

"Blasted fishtails! It's not enough that they meddle with my head, but they twist my body as well." – Tahngarth of the Weatherlight

This was one of my success stories for *Planar Chaos* – of course, there are many more, both in my portfolio and in those of my very talented fellow writers. But the road to flavor success was quite difficult. Every **Magic** set has its challenges, but this one had its particular odd qualities that demanded more attention and thought than any other before it. It was both fun and tiring, and I'm glad to say that everyone rose to the creative challenge.

Usually, when writers develop **Magic** worlds, they have to reveal new stuff about the characters and setting. What is the world like? How did it get that way? How do its inhabitants live their daily lives? Often, we're asked to reach into cracks and crevices so fine that we're the first to explore them. Of course, that still holds true with *Planar Chaos*, considering how different Dominaria is from any version before it. We set out to depict a Dominaria ravaged by apocalypse and twisted reality, a place more devastated and more bereft of hope than practically any other world before it. This is a world where the mighty nations of the past no longer truly exist, where all beings are united in one basic cause: to survive. Bringing across the harsh realities of this version of the game's oldest world is similar to the work we've done on other, completely new worlds. However, this set also offered an entirely different challenge: creating something new from a foundation that has already been established for years.

Unlike in *Time Spiral*, timeshifted cards in *Planar Chaos* came from alternate realities, altered versions of cards already printed. Since Creative really wanted to get into this idea of alternate **Magic** realities, it was decided that each planeshifted card would be named and flavored as though it actually came from the set the basis card was from. For example, **Merfolk Thaumaturgist** was based on **Dwarven Thaumaturgist**, which was printed in *Weatherlight*. Therefore, **Merfolk Thaumaturgist** would be thought of as a *Weatherlight* card, flavor-wise. No mentions of **Jaya Ballard**, **Otaria**, or **Empress Galina** in either name or flavor text. Perfectly good flavor text submitted for various cards ended up being reluctantly rejected because of this very issue. For a good deal of the set, we writers would have to immerse ourselves in the past.



After all, long-time players, and those interested enough to read about the old stories on cards or online, are easily able to tell if a bit of flavor supposedly from a past set or past world doesn't "feel right." They have tons of established material to draw on to create their impressions of what that setting, those characters, were like. The writers can draw on that same information as well, but that doesn't mean that the going is any less treacherous. Don't believe me? Just ask Christa Knott-Dufresne, one of my fellow writers:

I am going to make a confession: I'm a Magic newb. I started playing shortly before Betrayers [of Kamigawa] released, and fell in love with the game immediately, especially the flavor of the game. I read the flavor text on all of my cards (which were all Kamigawa cards at the time). I read the Kamigawa novels, then the Mirrodin novels, and when Ravnica came out, I read those novels. The world of Magic was constantly

changing, and I liked that. So when I started writing flavor text, I figured it would be a new world that we'd be building from scratch. But it wasn't. It was a nostalgia set. Nostalgia meant Dominaria, and I knew nothing about Dominaria. (I thought Keldon was a misspelling of Kjeldor... It was pathetic.) So I spent about a week cramming about Dominaria, reading every article and fan site I could find trying to learn Dominaria's history, and trying to figure out who the important characters are. Want to know what I learned? It took ten years to build the world of Dominaria for a reason. (And when I have free time again, I'm going to read all the Dominaria novels.)

Of course, even those of us who've been with Magic from its earliest days can have a little trouble remembering the wide range of detailed information that the storyline has produced over the years. There was a lot of Gatherer searching to remind ourselves of names, events, and possible flavor text sources (such as *Miracles of the Saints*, from *The Dark*). But it was worth it – from that attention to detail sprang a lot of neat touches.

For example, take another look at the flavor text for **Sunlance**. Those of you who were around during the days of the Weatherlight Saga may have skimmed over the source of the quote, subconsciously expecting it to be the same as it was then. But it's not – **Orim** is not a **Samite Healer** in this alternate reality, but a Samite *Inquisitor*! That one little change brings up so many interesting questions. How and why did her personality shift from the healing side of white to its zealot side? How did it affect her dealings with the rest of the crew, the Cho-Arrim, and the Weatherlight's many enemies?



For another example, take another look at the flavor text of **Frozen Æther**. How many cards from *Legends* (which contained its basis card, **Kismet**) does this piece refer to? The answer is two: **Elder Land Wurm** and **Hunding Gjornersen**. Many players wouldn't know this rather obscure, and rather bad, legendary creature, but it doesn't make a bit of difference in understanding the basic flavor text. However, the piece gets a lot of added dimension once you realize that not only is this oddly-named person mentioned in the flavor text an actual card, he also shares colors with both **Elder Land Wurm** AND **Frozen Æther**! Perhaps he cast both? It's those moments of discovery, whether from personal memory or research, that we were shooting for with this set.

Now let's take a look at a few more individual pieces from Planar Chaos:

"One does not need to sleep to find a nightmare in Urborg." --Venser

With a rock that big, "aim" is a low priority.

Disguised as a portal to paradise, the wall instead delivers a grey limbo.

Some students at the Institute of Arcane Study seek not knowledge, but power. Such students are quickly rooted out, but not before they learn a few valuable tricks.

Recognize those pieces? You shouldn't – they don't exist in printed form! All four are pieces of flavor text I contributed to this set and that were accepted for print at one point, but were cut or changed for one reason or another.

The first three were pieces slated for, in order, **Phantasmagorian**, **Hammerheim Deadeye**, and **Æther Membrane**. However, the editors have a lot of say over what sorts of names and flavor text make it onto a card. One major reason: space. It's their duty to make sure that the text on cards is not only legible, but looks good – not crowded, not unnecessarily small or large. A lot of this involves deciding on font sizes, then adjusting them as new information becomes available. As it turns out, those three cards had text that looked best at a size that couldn't include my flavor text. Perhaps it's for the best in the case of **Æther Membrane**. Although the flavor text follows the art concept for how the wall "bounces" creatures, it might be a little too blue for a red card.



I bring up the fourth piece, once slated for **Prodigal Pyromancer**, to demonstrate an important point about how we had to deal with the unique challenges of writing for timeshifted cards. Although I don't know the "real" logic for replacing my piece, I can certainly present my guess, and how it reveals some of the heavy thinking that had to go into this set.

To refresh your memory, here's the flavor text from the Pyromancer's basis, **Prodigal Sorcerer**, that inspired this piece:

Occasionally, a member of the Institute of Arcane Study acquires a taste for worldly pleasures. Seldom do they have trouble finding employment.

So why might my original piece have been changed? First of all, it's a little too cerebral for a red card, especially one so interested in indiscriminately dealing damage. Secondly, my piece implies that the Institute of Arcane Study is still a "blue" place (it rejected the red Pyromancer) but its teachings were still able to produce a red-aligned creature! For a color that's been getting fewer and fewer creatures that tap to deal direct damage, this would be unusual. Third, it's a little too direct of a "parody" of the original flavor text. Arguably, it's not necessarily a bad thing, but remember that **Prodigal Sorcerer** was already reprinted as a timeshifted card in the last set. This card's flavor text should be an opportunity to do something different.

The fourth point is perhaps the most important: Unlike many timeshifted cards, whose flavor text dealt only with the creature or spell depicted on the card, **Prodigal Pyromancer** was an opportunity to introduce a more unusual Dominaria with its reference to the Institute. My original flavor text really didn't have to come from an alternate universe at all; it could easily have been printed as-is in a Core set. But this is Planar Chaos! It's supposed to be about alternate universes, the unusual! Well, what if the Institute of Arcane Study was a red-aligned institution, dedicated to teaching its students in the ways of spectacular explosions? The Pyromancer's printed flavor text addresses all of these points. It's

simple, it's punchy, and it hints at a world that's very different from the Dominaria players know and love. That's exactly what we writers were trying to accomplish with the "alternate universe" timeshifts. Now here are some mini-stories about individual cards, brought to you by myself and others on the *Planar Chaos* team:

Timecrafting: With this piece, I hoped to answer a flavor question that may have been brought to mind in some players (as I certainly thought of the same): how is adding and removing time counters red? It certainly feels like a sneaky blue mechanic. After all, blue did have Clockspinning in just the previous set. The answer presented itself in the most basic place imaginable: the name of the set. This is *Planar Chaos*, where the fabric of time and space is going crazy. What self-respecting red mage wouldn't want to be part of that havoc, to expand the chaos, to do whatever they want to the basic building blocks of reality itself? I had a fun time imagining wild-eyed mountain shamans diving wholeheartedly into the crossing and breaking time streams, swimming around and doing what they wanted in it. The flavor text I came up with just begins to hint at that.

Wistful Thinking: Another story of almost-was from Christa Knott-Dufresne:



Since this was the first set I worked on, I was a little timid at first, and it took a couple of accepted submissions before I felt comfortable and confident in my writing. The first of my "accepted" submissions didn't actually make it onto a card, though. It was a piece of flavor text for the card that eventually became "Wistful Thinking." I looked at the art and it made me intensely sad for Dominaria: the wizard reaching out, tentatively touching the rift in front of him, as if he wanted to go to the world that the rift was showing him but was too scared by the possibilities to actually cross the rift. The feeling was so intense; I just had to write it down. This is what I wrote: *We pressed our hands together, my rift-reflection weeping for the ruin around me even as I wept at my cowardice in not joining him in paradise.*

It was accepted during the first round, but eventually the card became Wistful Thinking, and the flavor text changed. I was disappointed, because I really liked the piece that I wrote, but I understood the change. Wistful Thinking is a great name, but my piece of flavor text just didn't work with it.

Harmonize: Ideas for flavor text can come anywhere, if you only know to look out for them. For Jay Moldenhauer-Salazar, a good "aha" moment came from one of those closest to him, namely his wife:



Sarah was raised by a Buddhist father (even though she now considers herself more Hindu, theology-speaking), and values meditation a great deal. In fact, as a Unitarian-Universalist minister, she spends a good amount of time preaching about the benefits of meditation.

Thus, Harmonize's flavor text was inspired by her sermons on the subject, just as Phantom Warrior's Ninth Edition flavor text, also Jay's creation, was inspired by his wife's love of Ralph Waldo Emerson. It's a good lesson: Whenever I'm stuck for flavor text ideas, I take a break and just live life for a little while. You never know when an insight will pop up!

The Fine Folks Behind Planar Chaos Creative:

- Matt Cavotta (ruler of us all)

I hope you've enjoyed this little peek into the thinking that went into *Planar Chaos*. This set brought with it challenges and opportunities that I don't think we'll see again for quite a while, so it was a pleasure bringing the past (albeit in a different form) to players who both know and love it and to players who've never seen it themselves. Of course, the challenges didn't end there - why, in *Future Sight*, we had to... Well, that, as they say, is another story.

- Brady Dommermuth (measurer of the ruler of us all)
- Elye Alexander
- Doug Beyer
- Garrett Baumgartner
- John Carter
- Christa Knott-Dufresne
- Adam Lee
- Jay Moldenhauer-Salazar
- Rei Nakazawa (yours truly)
- Jake Theis