

Magic in Stories

The impact of magic on storytelling.

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It's *Weatherlight* Week, a week dedicated not only to the card set and airship both styled *Weatherlight*, but also to that eponymous multi-year saga of **Magic** stories. I've been thinking about **Magic**'s relationship with stories a lot lately, and the *Weatherlight* Saga is a crucial story to understand in that context. When we in the creative team make plans for future developments in the fictional fabric of **Magic**, the *Weatherlight* Saga is an ever-present backdrop. While thinking about the *Weatherlight* Saga I reached some conclusions that startled me. And so, while visions of planeshifting airships sail through your heads, I'd like to let you in on my thought process and see if you agree with where I've ended up.

I'd like to start where I often do, inside my own head. ("I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well," Thoreau once wrote.)

Magic in daily life

See, I have this fond fantasy. Against my will I've been brought to open mike night at a local coffee bar. My friends ignore my shy protests and drag me, kicking and screaming, up to the stage. They deposit me there, in the spotlight, and vanish into the darkness. The audience is waiting. There's an uncomfortable whine of feedback from the mike. I cough, and the cough is magnified in the PA system. The house lights are blindingly hot. I can see some of the faces of the audience—they're already breaking eye contact with me, trying not to form a relationship with this sweaty guy who's obviously going to embarrass himself. And then—

I slay.

I bust out my best *American Idol* showstopper, and fill that little coffee bar with these amazing pipes that none of them knew I had. My Pavarotti-like lungs carry the day, and when it's done, everyone agrees I blew away all the other schlubs at the coffee bar. My friends are dumbfounded. "We never knew you could sing!" they say, and slap me on the back while I humbly refuse them an encore.

Well, I can't sing. Not even close. That's why it's a fantasy. It's a daydream borne—if I can psychoanalyze myself here briefly—out of eye-rolling classic performance anxiety combined with an equally embarrassing approval-seeking impulse left over from my school days. The fear that I might one day have to stink up some unwitting open mike night, karaoke bar, or Rock Band session keeps me up at night concocting scenarios of my unblemished success.

I've got more like this. There's the one where the school bully finally decides to actually beat me up, and the whole school is shocked to discover that I'm some sort of boxing prodigy in the process of watching me knock his teeth onto the schoolyard asphalt. There's the one where I'm introduced to somebody's cool, sophisticated friend from Kyoto and I bust out impeccable Japanese fluency out of nowhere. Also, I make a clever suggestion from the wine list—innovative but not too showy.

It's all about hidden talents. The appeal of the hidden talent is universal. Being a human being is hard work; there are a lot of opportunities to screw up, and most of us wish we were better equipped to handle all the situations life throws at us. The idea that we could possess the one skill that would shine in this situation—and, in the process, get some serious street cred from our peers as a bonus side effect—is incredibly seductive.

Why, do you suppose, has the *Harry Potter* franchise made approximately one point seven ludicrillion dollars worldwide? What do you think has made *Heroes* such a hit on Monday nights, or has caused *Star Wars* to be such an enduring favorite?

It's because everybody wants magic at their fingertips, whether "magic" is interpreted as having unlocked genetic superpowers, being strong in the Force, or getting a letter from an owl saying "Hey, turns out your sucky life with your muggle family was a big mistake, you're a wizard with special



powers—in fact, you're the most important wizard in history and are destined to defeat the ultimate evil. Cheers."

Magic in stories

Magic (and here I mean magic with a little "m" and no boldface) has a special role in fiction. It has enormous power and some surprising drawbacks. We're drawn to fantasy because of the wish fulfillment that magic provides. Magic is power. Magic is getting your way just by manifesting an act of will.



It's exciting. It automatically breaks you out of the world of the commonplace. In our often dull and disappointing world, magic provides the promise that possibility is only limited by our imagination (and our mana supply—more on this in a moment).

But the presence of magic in a story presents challenges for the author. Magic is a problem-solver. The whole point of it is that it gets you through a sticky situation without having to do things the hard way. Say you're writing a story in which a dragon attacks the village of our hero, a wizard. Here's one way that could play out.

PEASANT: Oh no! A dragon is attacking our town! Won't anyone save us?

WIZARD: Never fear. I cast "**S**lay Dragon." (*snaps her fingers*)

PEASANT: Huh. How did you do that?

WIZARD: It's *magic!* I'm a *wizard!*

PEASANT: (*shrugs*) Good enough for me. Hey, who wants dragon burgers?

A story is only satisfying when the protagonist struggles. When she struggles, we identify with her problems and we sympathize with her. When she finally manages to overcome her problems, we cheer.

If the appeal of magic is that it simplifies problem-solving, it runs the risk of *replacing* that struggle, becoming a plot shortcut. Having your protagonist know a spell called "circumvent plot" is a bad story waiting to happen. But there are things we can do. Let's try a variation on the same dragon scenario.

PEASANT: Oh no! A dragon is attacking our town! Won't anyone save us?

WIZARD: I know a powerful spell called "**S**lay Dragon," but I'll need a lot of mana to cast it.

PEASANT: There's a powerful source of mana at the bottom of the chasm outside town, but it's full of monsters and the terrain is treacherous.

WIZARD: It may be dangerous, but if I don't go down there and tap into that source of mana, the town will be destroyed. (*bravely*) I must go.

Far from perfect, but isn't that better? Now the story is about the personal bravery of our wizard, not about whether or not she knows one spell. She still knows a spell that deals with the main problem, but now she has obstacles to overcome.

In this scenario, magic is powerful, but it has *costs*. This should sound familiar, **Magic** fans!

The Costs of Casting

There are a number of ways of introducing magic into a story that don't make it too easy, that enhance the story rather than short-circuiting it.

Magic requires mana

Why can the wizard not just snap her fingers and cast **S**lay Dragon? The same reason you can't Kaervek's Torch your opponent for 20 whenever you feel like it. Magic takes resources to fuel it, whether that means harvesting gobs of mana or having other components, like knowing the command word or smashing a precious gem every time you cast a big spell. Those resources are hard to procure, which generates obstacles. Our hero doesn't find everything it takes to accomplish her goals sitting unused in her junk drawer next to the Scotch Tape and rubber bands—no. She has to go out and work for them. She has to incur risks—and she might fail, which makes us interested.



Magic requires study

Luke Skywalker didn't hear about the evil Empire, then immediately hop in his X-wing to go kill the Emperor. He had to train under Yoda as a Jedi to be able to use the Force. If magic is the end result of serious study, then it *creates* plot rather than circumventing it. We can believe that impossible things are possible much more readily if we see the effort it takes to do them. And we get a chance to identify with the magic user, by first seeing him when he's a regular person like us.



Magic requires personal sacrifice

Sometimes magic isn't about training time, but other, more subtle tradeoffs. Magic can accomplish wondrous things in the story—that's part of the point—but if the wizard has to make personal sacrifices in order to use it, then it raises difficult choices. Difficult choices are great for plot. Here are two scenarios.

WIZARD: My best friend has died before his time! This is intolerable! Is there a way to bring him back from the dead?

ARCHMAGE: Nope. Doesn't work like that.

Cop-out. Once magic is part of the story, unless the rules are very clear about what it can or can't do, the reader will find it unsatisfying to simply disallow some kind of magical effect. Here's a better way:

WIZARD: My best friend has died before his time! This is intolerable! Is there a way to bring him back from the dead?

DEMON: (*grinning*) Of course. It's a simple spell. Let me show you. It won't cost you a thing!

WIZARD: (*frowns*) Hmm, that sounds... bad for me. But if it'll get my friend back...

DEMON: Okay, great, I have all the paperwork right here. Let's see, I'll need you to sign here, and initial here...



Delicious. Now the wizard has to make an awful choice, one she knows will get her into trouble. I've always thought it was fascinating that **Raise Dead**, a hugely powerful effect in most stories, is a one-mana common in the base set (well, it's **Recover** in *Tenth*, but you get what I mean). "Cost" doesn't always have to mean mana cost; it can mean making hard choices to get what you want.

Magic has consequences

When a wizard uses magic to get what she wants, there are ramifications. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Buffy's friend Willow became a witch capable of extremely powerful magic. Using magic didn't

take much out of Willow—she could basically do whatever she wanted, at will. But the show made sure that there were consequences for her actions. The more she used magic, the more she saw magic as the quick solution for everything. She crossed a line when she began using magic to manipulate people to her own whims, which damaged her relationships with her friends. Ultimately she had to give up magic in order to keep her humanity intact. Hidden talents are great, but when magic has repercussions, it generates drama, which generates great stories.

Most fantasy stories use one or two of these techniques. **Magic** stories, of course, use all of them!



Magic vs. choices

Now here's the strange part. What I'm most startled by is that magic is so rarely crucial to the climax of a story. My coffee bar fantasy aside, the hero doesn't use her hidden talents to actually save the day. For the story to have wide appeal, the hero must triumph because of her humanity (or, in *Lorwyn*, her elfness or her kithkinness, as you like), not her magic. The Emperor dies not from Luke's powerful jedi mastery, but from Vader's change of heart. In the first season of *Heroes* (spoiler alert!), Peter Petrelli saves New York from a nuclear blast not because of his powers, but because of his decision to sacrifice himself. At the end of the *Weatherlight* Saga, Gerrard gives up the luxuries of home, family, friends, and eventually his own life—note, all things that any human being could give up—in order to rid the world of the dark lord Yawgmoth.

Now, magic is certainly *involved* in these fantasy endings. The Emperor didn't go down without first engaging in a Force-filled firefight; superpowers were all over the *Heroes* climax; and Gerrard died in a blast that involved all the pieces of the thoroughly magical *Legacy*. The straight-up use of magic to solve your problems can be entertaining to read about for a short time—"Chandra blasts her way out of a jam" is pretty cool, especially when [you get to see the visuals](#). But then, Chandra took on personal danger to get what she wanted, and made choices.

In the end, stories, even the ones about magic, are ultimately about choices that people make. We're interested in them because we can feel the characters' emotions as they endure their tribulations. We can see the choices they make and the results those choices lead to, and learn about what we can do with our own lives. Magic serves a double purpose: to provide the irresistible fantasy that allows us to *escape* our regular lives, but also to illustrate the hidden talents we use to *live* them.

What do you think? Are there other roles for magic in stories? What do you think are other important examples of magic (or magic-like abilities) in books, TV, or movies? In those other stories, does the climax come down to the use of magic, or a human being making a choice?