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Staging the Set

Doug Beyer
Taste the Magic
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*This article was strange in structure and a little hard to read. But in a way, that fit its purpose perfectly: to illustrate my mixed-up mental states during a typical week of creative text work. Because of its weirdness and the amount it pulls back the curtain on the process of making the cards, I got more positive comments on this one than any other of my columns at the time. It also got some of the harshest negative comments, too: there's a lot of me-content mixed in with the **Magic** content, which I can understand isn't everyone's cup of tea. Anyway, I hope you'll have a nice literal hot cup of tea and give it a fresh read. I'll see you again live in a week.*

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I've been watching a show this fall called *Journeyman*, mostly because I was a fan of Kevin McKidd, the dour Scotsman who played Lucius Vorenus on HBO's *Rome*. *Journeyman* is not great, especially if you've already done a stint of watching *Quantum Leap* before it, and I may be telling my TiVo to give up on it soon. But there are parts of the show that have a familiar twinge for me. I have no random unstuck-in-time problem personally (and I feel like I'd do a much better job than Dan Vassar's doing if I did—I mean, you spend short amounts of time switching between the past and the present, and you have the benefit of Google when you're in 2007—play the 1980s lottery or stock market, dude, seriously). But I sympathize with time-skipping protagonists. In a way, the making of **Magic** sets is like becoming unstuck in time. Today I thought I'd take a little journey through the ins and outs of my work so you can stroll the multiverse's time-stream along with me.

Chronological date: Monday, October 8, 2007
Mental date: Late summer, 2006

It's a little over a week ago, from when you read this. It's a gloomy October day in Seattle—overcast, cool, and drizzling occasionally. As I sit in my cubicle, I focus on my main goal for this week: to answer all of the final issues with the creative text (names and flavor text) of *Shadowmoor*, the May 2008 big set, so I can hand that file off once and for all and move on to "Donut." But first, I have an immediate deadline to attend to: I have to finish up my [Taste the Magic](#) article for this week. To get in the right frame of mind for my article, I focus my mind on tribals, and all the decisions that went into naming them that. My mind is not on the present October 2007 time frame, around the release of *Lorwyn*, but over a year earlier, in summer, 2006, when tribals were getting their name.



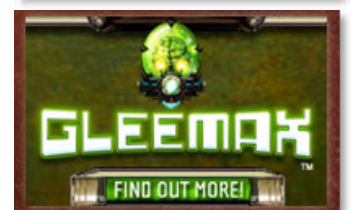
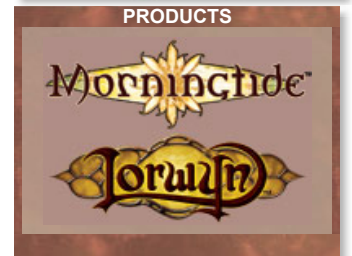
At that time, I had just moved from being a web developer for [magicthegathering.com](#) and part-time flavor text writer to being part of the **Magic** creative team. One of my first assignments when I came to R&D was to puzzle through the dozens of keywords for the upcoming set, *Future Sight*. Matt Cavotta was still in the building at that time, still taking the lead on *Planar Chaos* creative text and mentoring me on the details of the position. (Although Matt was leaving Wizards under his own power, training your replacement pretty much universally sucks, so I thank Matt for being consistently cool about it throughout the process.) Matt had his hands full with putting all the finishing touches on *Planar Chaos*, so the *Future Sight* keywords would be my fine kettle of fish. Some important decisions were going on behind some of those keywords, including the adoption of reach, deathtouch, lifelink, and shroud as new evergreen keywords, so it was a weighty responsibility

And then there was tribal. Again, *Future Sight* was the premiere of the tribal card type in the form of *Tarmogoyf* and *Bound in Silence*, so deciding what to do with that new card type was an issue for *Future Sight*, not *Lorwyn*.

As I wrote about tribals it was a gloomy October day outside, but in my head I was traveling back through a warm August of 2006, replaying all those debates about Goblin instants and heritage vs. kin vs. tribe vs. tribal.

I finished my Tribal Week article and sent it off to the web team. (Let me be clear. The electrons went out of my computer, to the 3rd floor server closet, down through the Jefferies tubes of the building to Technical Services on the 2nd floor, then back up through the building to the 3rd floor server closet, down the same wire bundle from where they originated, and ended up about four feet away, on the other side of my cube wall. See, the [magicthegathering.com](#) web team is grouped together with the creative team these days, and our cubes are adjacent. So "sent it off to the web team" is not as epic a journey as it sounds.)

Sweet. Now I could get back to my main goal: set my brain on May 2008, and finish up *Shadowmoor*.



I'm back in the present, and it's the 8th of October. Today's the day when I am to turn in my world-building writing contributions to our team's official world-building guru, Brady Dommermuth. This is for "Rock," the codename for the large set that comes out in fall, 2008 (the block goes "Rock / Paper / Scissors"). Brady had asked for a few writers to churn out ideas for the setting, so that he could build from them and assemble the "Rock" style guide. I've been excited to work on world-building for "Rock," as I was when I contributed to the *Lorwyn* style guide before it (which is a story I've not yet told in *Taste the Magic*—note to self: do so).

I tune my brain to the fall of 2008, the release of the yet-unnamed set "Rock." I try to imagine what it'll be like next October—which isn't very hard, since it's likely to look pretty much like this outside—again, a gray, drizzly day. "Rock" is awesome, so it's been fun writing world-building details for it. Plus this time around I'm benefiting from the experience I've gained from working on the creative text for *Lorwyn*, *Morningtide* and *Shadowmoor*—I now have a much better sense of how the style guide shapes the eventual creative text, so I've been diligent to insert material into my world-building thoughts that will help the creative text writers create good submissions for "Rock" down the line. In a way, I'm helping my future self out—my early world-building self throwing a long pass to my later creative text head honcho self, as it were.

Headphones on. Imagination flowing. Fingers typing. I get into the groove. I rock on "Rock" for a while—but the present interrupts again.

[record scratching noise]

Chronological date: Monday, October 8, 2007
Mental date: Tuesday, October 9, 2007

Wow, is it afternoon already? Did I eat? Oh, I'm eating a sandwich from the café downstairs. Good. I've got to put together a Magic Arcana for tomorrow, so that Monty Ashley can put it up for the Tuesday magicthegathering.com update. I gotta put my brain in the present again, or the very near future. Gotta think about what the world is seeing right now so I can write a relevant Arcana. Most activities in the process of making **Magic** are done waaaaay in advance, but like in almost any business, some parts of the process are done at the last minute—in this case, right before publish time. We've gotten pretty good at it, and in fact I like it. There are powerful benefits to creating content at the last minute—part of the power of the daily Magic Arcana feature is that it can be timely.



Case in point: we had already decided we would run those short TV ads for the *Lorwyn* release events as Arcana for the first few days of this week. Running them before the release events happen is sort of a no-brainer, so this week it is. And it's quick Arcana content to put together, so that's fine by me. I write it, send it off (to its destination about four feet away), and then I'm finally off to work on *Shadowmoor*.

Chronological date: Monday, October 8, 2007
Mental date: May, 2008

Time to re-tune the brain again, this time to the release of *Shadowmoor* next spring. I'm extremely happy with how *Shadowmoor* is going, and it's almost done. I'm almost at the stage where I feel proud of it, but it needs a crucial bit more work so I'm not allowing myself that particular emotion yet. I look through the comments from Del Laugel, **Magic** senior editor, and I feel some other, tougher emotions. I've overused some words in card names. Some pieces of flavor text turned out to be too long. Some cards got their rules text cut down during some clever templating, so they have new room for flavor text. And some names are just plain not working out, now that R&D has playtested the cards with the names I've bestowed on them. Some are too much of a mouthful to say, some feel strange alongside the mechanic, and some are confusingly close to existing card names in recent sets.

I have my work cut out for me.

Still, this batch of comments is no worse than those of any other set. This is approximately the same size of snowdrift I shoveled my way through for the last several sets, so I'm not surprised. The set is almost final shape—and shape is the right word, because it's starting to feel not just like a collection of individual card names and pieces of flavor text, but like a thing. It's got a form and a texture, like a tangible object. This set has a mission and it's succeeding at it. I kind of want to cheer, but it's too early to celebrate. This will be a tough week of judgment calls, painful excisions, and the occasional application of on-the-fly creativity.

This train is pulling out of the station.

Commute. Eat. TV. Bed.

Chronological date: Tuesday, October 9, 2007
Mental date: Friday, October 12, 2007

Commute. First floor café. Cubicle. The Web.

I couldn't tell it from the parking lot, but I can tell now that I'm inside. It's a little more vacant around R&D, because several people from the office are starting to head off to Spain for [Pro Tour-Valencia](#). We don't know yet that it's about to [rain elephants and giraffes](#) all around the venue at the end of the week, and flood out the first day of the

2007

Mental date: Fall, 2008

But I can't wonder about fetchlands and Tarmogoyfs now—I'm due elsewhere. Elsewhen. I have to get back in the "Rock" headspace, because I didn't finish my part of the world-building yesterday. I'm happy the tribal article is done, so it can be off my mind. I can get to rocking the "Rock" business again.

Can't elaborate. You understand. But it goes well. Awesomeness abounds.

My part of it is done. It's a day late, but Brady says it's no big deal; he was still working on his part too. I send my piece off to Brady. The electrons travel a long way, but end up only a few feet away. My mind wants to snap back to the *Shadowmoor* era, but I have a meeting to attend.



Chronological date: Tuesday, October 9, 2007.

Mental date: Fall, 2009.

That's right, 2009. I have a meeting for "Live" design. Live is the codename for the set that begins the "Live / Long / Prosper" block. It comes out in 2009, a year after "Rock," and around two years from today's chronological date. It's my first design team, and I'm excited. But I'm also a little spinny in the head. My brain has never been set this far in the future before—I've only traveled forward a little more than a year for any previous work. Yesterday I was mostly in *Shadowmoor* territory, and I prepared an Arcana about *Lorwyn*. And look where I am now. Those sets feel like the distant past. I ate my morning bagel in 2007 and now we're making decisions for 2009—late 2009. Just like Dan Vassar (or Sam Beckett or Billy Pilgrim before him), I have become unstuck in time.

The meeting is a little unreal. We're talking about things that aren't even close to implementable ideas at this stage. This is very different stuff from my regular job, which deals with almost-final cards with almost-final art, way, way down the train tracks from here. Even on my tip-toes I can't see the creative text stage (my stage) of "Live" from here—it's over the horizon somewhere. By the time the Doug-as-designer's cards make all the way to Doug-as-creative-text-honcho, they could be completely transformed, concretized. But for right now, the set is wide open—more accurately, it's not even a set, just ideas on a whiteboard. It makes me appreciate how many decisions go into making a **Magic** card—just how long this train has to travel.

Chronological date: Tuesday, October 9, 2007

Mental date: 2008

After lunch, it's time for the Tuesday **Magic** Meeting. Today senior brand manager Elaine Chase is giving her slideshow for brand's plans for **Magic** for 2008. It's strangely comforting to be thinking only a year in advance for a while. There are exciting ideas coming next year, plans that feel like they're just around the corner. It reminds me to finalize my holiday travel plans. I get back to my desk. I do so.

Chronological date: Tuesday, October 9, 2007

Mental date: Wednesday, October 10, 2007

It's getting late in the afternoon, so it's Arcana time again. One last batch of the TV spots to show. I write a bit of text and get in one more plug for the weekend's Release Events. It's looking overcast outside, and it's kind of windy. Leaves flip around and the usual October crows fly by the window. It is definitely going to rain here in October.

Chronological date: Tuesday, October 9 through Thursday, October 11, 2007

Mental date: Varies

The rest of the week passes by in this fashion. Each day I stretch my brain far into the future and then get snapped back to the present, which feels increasingly, strangely, like the past. Each night I treat my chronological whiplash with generous applications of present-day media. I commute home, I eat, I apply *The Daily Show* directly to my cerebral cortex, I find out what else TiVo and/or Netflix has scavenged for me, I read websites, I read books, I sleep. The routine's nice—it's stable. Lets me be a normal human being for a while. The week zips by.

I return to work.

Chronological date: Friday, October 12, 2007

Mental date: May, 2008.

Today's Friday. Today's the *Shadowmoor* deadline. This train is barreling out of here now, and I still have a lot of tweaks I want to make to it. Happily Greg Collins has supplied Monday's Arcana for me already, something about [Worlds and a car](#) (?!), so that's all done. I can stay in springtime all day, stay in the *Shadowmoor* headspace so I can spend the whole day running alongside the train and putting on all those finishing touches.

I shorten flavor text. I replace a few card names. I replace an entire cycle of card names. I change attributions. I catch inconsistencies and fix them. I get gut feelings and act on them. I go through the list of comments from

Wait, I have email.

Stop the celebration, there were a few more comments, some responses to my responses. Apparently I fixed one problem but caused another, and—I have to agree, I nod at my monitor—that card name is even worse than what I changed it from. I fix it—delicately. Things are intricately balanced now—it's tough to change one thing about the set without upsetting all the connections with all the other things in the set. I can't change this card to this other thing, because that word is already used there. I could change that instance of that word but then that affects this other cycle here. And so on. But I find a way to keep the spirit of the first name while reducing the card's confusion potential and without trampling on other decisions in the set. Kick ass. I have to write new flavor text on the fly for it, because the old flavor text wouldn't fit with this new name. But that's a small price to pay. I write it and send all those changes off.

I am done! The set is DONE!

Oh wait a minute, stop again, I have one more email. A lost batch of comments we never got around to addressing. Drat. Okay. I plow through them one by one, again. This time it feels final, but I'm not standing on my chair this time. I send it off, and I quietly start working on other things.

I'm still working on *Shadowmoor* things, but not on the cards themselves this time. I'm writing the little summary of the storyline that will go into *Shadowmoor* theme decks, an enjoyable piece of text that sums up the whole process for me. That text is some people's first impression to the set, so I spend extra care crafting it so it will get them as excited as I'm feeling for it. It feels full circle to be talking in introductory ways about *Shadowmoor*—it's similar to the kickoff email I sent to my *Shadowmoor* writers several months ago, when my part of the process first began.



No email has come back from editing. I look through the set in Multiverse—all the changes I sent have been implemented. I feel a swell of pride, finally. The set is like new-fallen snow—crystalline and pristine, with everything in its right place.

Millions of one-of-a-kind decisions combine to form a microscopic lattice that, macroscopically, look like a drift of beautiful simplicity.

Outside it's October—I keep forgetting. Not snowy, but brisk and swirling with leaves of fire. The autumn crows give me glassy, sidelong glances as I walk across the parking lot. As I tweet-tweet my car doors to head home, I allow myself one more future-directed thought before the weekend: I have an idea for next week's Taste the Magic column.



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