

# Schwa's Unofficial Guide to MTG Fansets

## A Quick Glossary

- AFR is Dungeons and Dragons: Adventures in the Forgotten Realms, a retail limited set designed by Wizards of the Coast.
- MON is Monsters of Chikyu, a Pokemon-inspired retail limited set designed by Cajun. Part of the MS2 custom constructed format, and formerly part of the Revolution Custom Standard custom constructed format.
- MRV is The Cosmic Cube, a Marvel Comics-themed draft cube designed by Schwa77.

## What is a Fanset?

Throughout this article, I will refer to a variety of projects as “fansets,” so I think it’s important to start with a definition. I define a fanset as “a project which aims to bring an existing intellectual property into the mechanics of MTG.” One important qualifier for me is that a fanset needs to draw specifically off an intellectual property, and not just an existing real-world reference. For example, sets like Theros, Amonkhet, and Kaldheim would not fall under my definition of fansets, since they are adapted from real-world mythology and culture. Adventures in the Forgotten Realms, by contrast, directly brings the characters and world of Dungeons and Dragons into the mechanics of MTG, so I would consider it a fanset.

*(Is it maybe a little weird to refer to AFR as a fanset when both MTG and DND are properties owned by WotC? Sure, but it makes writing this article a lot easier)*

## Why are fansets challenging to make?

Fansets are notorious within the Custom Magic community for being very challenging to create. One big reason for this is weighing the benefits of representing your source material, and how closely to stick to canon MTG precedent. If the set strays too close into existing MTG, then fans of the third party property will be disappointed when specific characters, locations, or events are represented with traditional, tried-and-true effects. However, if the fanset leans too heavily into its source material, then players not familiar with it could feel alienated by something not feeling enough like MTG. These expectations all line up to create a pretty narrow zone where both sides involved are satisfied with a project, and it can take a lot of iteration to reach that point.

One other reason that fansets have a notorious reputation is that they are often very appealing projects to beginner designers, myself included. I started MRV in December of 2019, and I was not at all familiar with the greater Custom Magic world. Obviously, being much less knowledgeable about MTG, the project was nowhere near as refined as it is today. I believe that many novice designers can fall into this trap, and I hope this guide serves to help them overcome some of the common issues.

## Is this a comprehensive guide?

Nope! I don't believe there's any true comprehensive guide to custom MTG design, and the same applies here. What I hope this guide is useful for is comparing different styles of fansets, which pathway could be best applied to a project, and some advice I've picked up during my Custom Magic career to try and help with some common problems.

## Different Styles of Projects, and why to choose them

While "fanset" may sound like it only refers to a retail limited environment, I don't believe that's the only way to integrate external media into MTG, and sometimes it isn't even the best one. This section analyzes the pros and cons of different styles of representation.

One big reason to choose a size of project is the limit on art resources for said project. AFR, with fully commissioned art, doesn't really fall into this category, but a DND set wouldn't be challenging to art due to the popularity of the source material. MON and Pokemon fall into the same category, whereas MRV gets plentiful art from decades of comics. However, some projects simply don't have the public art resources to support a complete retail limited, and need to look for a smaller size. For example, I have looked into a project adapting the *Horizon Zero Dawn* franchise into MTG, but art resources are heavily restricted to just the main character and a few machines, meaning a retail limited set would be incredibly challenging to support.

### Alias Cards



If you want to bring a third-party IP directly into canon MTG with existing cards, alias cards are the best way to do it. They offer a fun way to re flavor cards with a third-party theme, and lets you bypass most of the card balancing issues by simply reusing existing ones. However, if you're looking for specific designs to better represent a character, keep reading.

## One-Off Cards



Probably the simplest and most common style of “fanset” project are one-off card designs. These aren’t necessarily intended to be played in a limited environment and often times are designed to help flavor-first Commander decks. If you’re looking to just do some fun top-down designs for characters without too much dedication to a full project, this is the route I would recommend.

The 27 Shades project (one card for each monocolour, 2c, 3c, then a 5c and colorless card) falls into this category, since most 27 Shades projects are not often made with the intent to play the cards (or at least, not as a full set. Some designers have explored 27 Shades of Commanders, for example.)

## Precon Decks



One of the easiest ways to actually play with cards is through preconstructed decks. These can be used to provide a dedicated environment for cards, and allow directly balancing power levels against each other. I have also found that precon decks are probably the best way to play with cards in paper, since they provide the lowest barrier to entry.

While my pictured example uses Duel Decks, they obviously aren't the only style of precon. Projects like Jumpstart or Commander precons (such as the upcoming Warhammer 40K line) fill a similar role, creating an isolated environment with easy paper play.



## Retail Limited



Stepping up in the complexity, we have retail limited. This is a full draft set (approximately 270 cards, pack distribution by rarity, etc.) There's plenty of information already about how to design a retail limited environment, so I won't go too deep into that here.

One thing to keep in mind when looking at a retail limited is how viable a nonlegendary-heavy environment is for a given franchise. MTG treats most named characters as legendary, which comes alongside mechanical implications (primarily the legend rule.) A set cannot reasonably support a very high concentration of legendary creatures, because it creates very awkward draft situations where players are incentivized to not draft multiple of a given card supporting an archetype due to the legend rule. For a frame of reference:

- AFR has 35 legendary creatures or planeswalkers. Some other characters (such as Vecna) are represented outside of these card types, but it's a workable number for our purposes.
- KHM, with low legends-matter mechanics, has 36 legendary creatures or planeswalkers (many of the rare/mythic ones are also MDFC, which reduces some legend rule problems.)
- DOM, with very high legends-matter mechanics, has 49. However, I don't believe this number can be achieved in a set without at least one mechanic as a payoff (or at least, some kind of mechanical through-line, even if not a named keyword) for legendary type.

One of the big things to identify for a retail-limited is the difference between character-centric and world-centric media. For example, both Dungeons and Dragons and Pokemon tend to be world-centric, with the majority of "tropes" being related to the more generic parts of the world. In DND, these are the NPCs and monsters which the players interact with. For Pokemon, these are the Pokemon themselves, treated more as wildlife than named characters. In contrast, Marvel Comics is extremely character-centric, and has a much harder time with "unnamed" characters. While miscellaneous goons and henchmen can fill out slots to some extent, it doesn't create for a very interesting draft experience when all of the exciting named characters are restricted to higher rarities. However, we have a solution for that.

## Cube



Much like the retail limited, I won't go into a ton of "how to design a cube" detail, since plenty of information already exist for it. I will, however, discuss some of the upsides (and downsides) of a cube compared to a retail limited.

One of the big upsides for a cube is the functional removal of legendary implication. Since cubes are traditionally singleton (no more than one of any given card exists in the cube), the legend rule tends to only matter with clone effects, which can be easily designed around.

Additionally, cubes offer a lot more mechanical freedom than a retail limited. The lack of rarity in a cube means that cards tend to be on a more flat power level, allowing designers to make sure characters can get more interesting designs than they otherwise would if represented at lower rarities in retail limited. This opened mechanical freedom also allows more flexibility with keywords than retail limited, which helps better flavorfully capture some concepts.

One big downside of cubes is that they tend to be quite a bit of work, and one that even experienced limited drafters are not as familiar with. The "average" draft cube is 360 cards, since that supports three rounds of fifteen cards per pack for an eight player draft pod. While this isn't the only size of cube viable (many people have experimented with 180 and 270 for smaller sizes, and cube sizes can go up as high as a designer wants them to,) it is still a considerable step up from the 270 cards of a retail limited.

I chose to pursue a cube environment for MRV due to the reasons listed above. I would not have been able to represent as many characters as I would have wanted to in a retail limited. MRV has over 200 characters represented through legendary creatures or planeswalkers, and even more are referenced on non-character cards like instants or sorceries.



## Multiverse Compliance



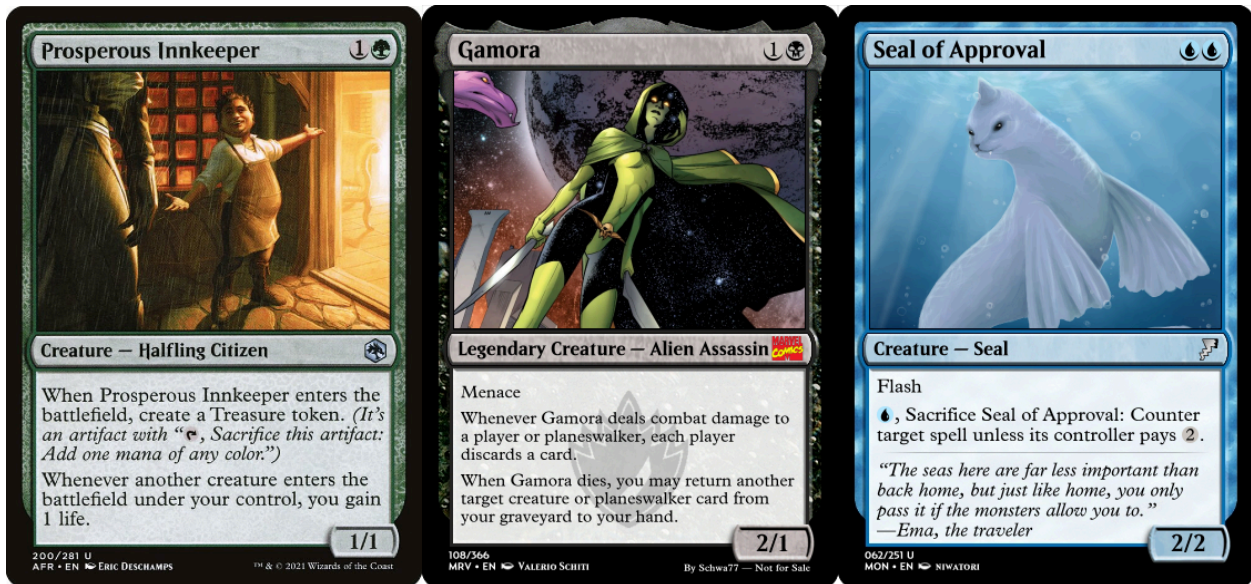
Magic's Multiverse is infinitely expansive, and with it comes the issue of multiverse compliance for fansets. Multiverse compliance means that a set exists as a plane within MTG's multiverse, rather than strictly being a 1-to-1 representation of the property it is based on. Sets such as MRV and AFR are intentionally isolated from the MTG multiverse and choose the 1-to-1 approach, meaning they aren't multiverse compliant. MON, in contrast, does exist as a plane (Chikyu) within the greater Custom Magic multiverse. There are upsides and downsides to both remaining multiverse compliant and departing from it, and the choice can strongly depend on the style of set and the franchise which it draws from,

MRV was never something I intended to be multiverse compliant, since I wanted it to be very directly representing the characters and worlds of Marvel Comics, and not tangentially related or referencing them. While I don't know for sure, I suspect AFR followed a very similar path of wanting to directly call out the DND tropes and characters, rather than create their own world inspired by them.

MON takes an alternate approach, integrating the flavor, world, and creatures of Pokemon seamlessly with an MTG plane. Much of this integration is viable due to the fact that Pokemon, for most intents and purposes, are not named characters in the same way that Iron Man or Drizzt Do'Urden are, since (usually) multiple of any given Pokemon exist in the world. Cajun adapts this into MON by representing many Pokemon as nonlegendary creatures, treated more as wildlife than named characters.

Multiverse compliance is a tricky thing for a lot of franchises, depending on how directly they want to represent their source material. I will focus on MRV as an example here. I think that a superhero-themed set in an original world, drawing inspiration from Marvel and other comic books, can work perfectly well in the MTG Multiverse. However, adapting Marvel Comics directly means it would feel out-of-place to include named characters, since they inherently aren't a part of MTG's multiverse. This is the same reason that MTG adapts mythologies and changes names (i.e., Alrund isn't named Odin,) since it helps the set feel more distinct from its source material, and thus more believable in the greater multiverse.

## New Creature Types



(Author's Note: This section of the article was written before the release of Unfinity, so Alien was not a black-border creature type yet.)

The introduction of new creature types tends to be a topic of contention when it comes to fansets, since an overabundance of franchise-specific creature types tends to leave a set feeling less like a MTG product. For example, many players were upset with the introduction of new types introduced in AFR, since they felt the new types could have been existing types (Gnoll could be Hyena, Halfling could be Kithkin, and so forth.) While some projects have new creature types just matter for “feeling right” vibes, others do face mechanical implications for the introduction of new types.

### Creature Types “Feeling Right”

Since MRV forms an isolated environment from canon MTG, there is no big mechanical downside to introducing a slew of new creature types for specific flavor. However, I chose to keep my new creature types fairly minimal, allowing the cube to still feel like a MTG project. The two new creature types introduced are Alien and Symbiote.

- Alien was pretty much necessary to make MRV work. I experimented with Moonfolk for a bit, but never loved it given how far the MRV characters were from canon Moonfolk. I also thought about breaking it down into separate types (Kree, Skrull, Inhuman, etc.), but that would have left a lot of types only used once for characters, and didn't do much to really help the flavor.
- Symbiote is for only one cycle in the cube, and mostly due to their unique Symbiosis mechanics. I don't think this type is as necessary for the project as Alien is, but I didn't like many of the canon options (even if I do think that Licids would be a fun reference.)
- Some of the new types I originally had in MRV have since been phased out. For much of the project's history, “Gamma” was used as the subtype for the Hulk-folk of the Marvel



Universe. In recent iterations, they have since become typed as Giants to remain more in-line with canon.

- “Hero” and “Villain” were used as catch-all types for, well, heroes and villains. However, that decreased some of the fun things I could do with typelines, since my space was limited with everything being legendary. I felt like it would be weird if only some Heroes were typed as such, leading to situations where Hawkeye couldn’t be an Archer and Tony Stark couldn’t be an Artificer. This led to me removing the Hero and Villain types. I elected to use specific types wherever possible, and then Warrior and Rogue loosely correlate to heroic and villainous characters. It’s not a perfect system (and it’s one I continue to refine), but I think it helps the set feel more close to a MTG project.

## Mechanical Implications of Creature Types

One concern with the introduction of new creature types is the lack of potential tribal synergies across multiple sets. For example, the introduction of the Halfling type added creatures flavorfully similar to Kithkin, while not working with the existing Kithkin tribal cards from Lorwyn block. Many players saw this as a missed opportunity.

While MON does use non-canon creature types (Giraffe, Seal, Weasel), it does not introduce any new ones to the MSEM format. All three types already existed within the format due to prior sets, so MON does not add any more mechanical divide than already exists. Because of this, I do not consider the types used in MON to be new in the same way that Halfling or Alien were to AFR or MRV respectively.

## Expansive Power Sets and How to Represent Them



One common pitfall of direct representation fansets is the tendency to overcomplicate cards for characters with a very wide array of abilities. Superman is the archetypical example, with a powerset including (but not limited to) flight, super strength, near indestructibility, heat vision, X-ray vision, freeze breath, and super hearing. Trying to represent all of this on one card will just create a mess of text, so it is important to narrow down what the most resonant and important tropes to represent are.

The idea of “resonant tropes” is pretty subjective and varies from person to person, but usually a designer can try to pick out what they think the most important ones are. For Superman, I would personally say the “requirements” are flying, some kind of protection to represent indestructibility, and some amount of overstated-ness to represent super strength.

Pictured here are four different designers’ takes on Superman (from left to right: LeetWizard, Mattelonian, Queen Emily, Popcornia. Graciously used with permission from all four designers.) Each design was created during a discussion about this topic on the MSE server, and I think it is interesting to see four very different ways to represent the same character, as well as the similarities between all four designs.

All four designers have at least some method of achieving flying, three natively and one through the Crime trigger. Three of the four also have some method of direct protection. This visually represents the concept of “resonant tropes,” with showcasing these repeated themes across different designs.

The biggest thing (in my opinion) to decide before designing something top-down is what of the “resonant tropes” is what you consider the most resonant and most important. Is the important part of Superman you want to represent that he’s a hero with a civilian identity? Is it his role as an invulnerable protector? Is it his diverse powers of heat vision and frost breath? None of these are wrong answers, but they all lead to different designs.