[SFX: VCR is loaded & spins up]

[Gentle water gushing, insects buzzing]

[Gentle piano music as farmyard ambience continues]

[Clap]

In February of 2024, Hasbro CEO Chris Cocks - best known for overseeing the firing of over a thousand employees shortly before Christmas day - announced that due to the incredible success of the *Lord of the Rings: Tales of Middle Earth Magic: the Gathering* set, Wizards of the Coast would be releasing two similarly sized “Universes Beyond” products in 2025. Quoted by Chase Carter in Dicebreaker magazine, he said to investors: [Bad Texan accent] “We think we’ll have a similar uplift as we did for Lord of the Rings, and that’s underlying a lot of our bullishness on the growth of Magic.”[1]

I do not know what Chris Cocks actually sounds like, but I also don’t actually care.

It is unclear as to whether or not these prospective products will be replacing in-universe *Magic* expansions. But two in one year would certainly crowd an already fit-to-bursting release schedule unless something got cut and pushed back.

Tales of Middle Earth[2] was a watershed moment for *Magic: the Gathering*. Being the second modern legal set to be produced in draftable booster-packs which exclusively and explicitly explores a non-*Magic* IP, and the first IP originating outside of Wizards of the Coast themselves. It was ludicrously successful to boot, being the second best selling *Magic the Gathering* set of all time, as reported by Matt Bassil at Wargamer,[3] beaten out only by Modern Horizons 2.

Previous to this, Universes Beyond had been constrained, if you can call it that, to constructed products like commander decks, and special Secret Lair releases, themselves a relatively recent addition in *Magic*’s 30 year history, depicting recognisable characters from

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[1] https://www.dicebreaker.com/games/magic-the-gathering-game/news/magic-the-gathering-two-premiere-set-universes-beyond-starting-2025-final-fantasy-marvel

[2] https://scryfall.com/sets/ltr

[3] https://www.wargamer.com/magic-the-gathering/mtg-lord-of-the-rings-second-best-selling-set

shows like *Doctor Who*[4], cartoons like *Transformers*[5], and video games like *Fortnite*[6]. This last example being deliciously appropriate.

Arguably *Fortnite's* most prominent feature is its staggeringly large & ever growing roster of IP tie-ins. From characters like *Thanos*, to actual people like *The Weeknd*, to concepts like the *Kamehameha*. No commodifable notion or recognisable likeness is safe from this vortex of culture. If there is an image, logo, or story that prompts positive recognition in the minds of 8-38 year olds, Epic Games has already sent its owner an email begging to cut a cheque for a licenced skin, and Hasbro isn't far behind.

Tap Terra's Golden Throne[7] to cast the ever humble autobot: Ultra Magnus[8]. Give him haste with Gimli's Reckless Might[9], and put Mr. House, President and CEO[10] into play when he attacks. With *Assassin's Creed*, *Final Fantasy*, *Marvel*, and more as yet unrevealed shallow depths to plumb, who's to say what part of Magic's waning originality will be skipped over and ignored to make room for *Tales from Arkham Asylum*, or *Magic: the Gathering: A Star Wars Story*.

Before *Fornite* and *Magic* all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere…

So, is this a good or a bad thing?

[Theme]

You know, I preferred Spice8Rack's earlier work. Yeah, Its new stuff is kind of derivative.

Oh, hello Spicy people of the Internet. I'm Spice8Rack AKA. Inigo Montoya if the Wokes got to him, and welcome back to the channel.

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[4] https://scryfall.com/sets/who
[5] https://scryfall.com/sets/bot
[6] https://scryfall.com/card/sld/445/triumph-of-the-hordes
[7] https://scryfall.com/card/40k/157/the-golden-throne
[8] https://scryfall.com/card/bot/15/ultra-magnus-tactician-ultra-magnus-armored-carrier
[9] https://scryfall.com/card/ltc/494/gimlis-reckless-might
[10] https://scryfall.com/card/pip/7/mr-house-president-and-ceo

The dialectic teaches us that all things exist in a state of growth or decay, that the old is dying and the new is struggling to be born. So when we look at Wizards & Hasbro's increasingly unsustainable growth targets, mass layoffs, & slashed language & region support for the global south, it's easy to view this as having causal relationship with the direction the game itself has gone in. *Magic* dying in a financial sense becomes conflated with people's personal grievances with *Magic*'s diluted identity. A picture of a collectable Ezio Auditore da Firenze[11] with the caption "*Magic* is dead" is synonymous with the same caption above a picture of Hasbro's languishing stock price. Or even a screenshot of a wiki page updated to confirm the homosexuality of a background character. The rarely proven idiom of "Go woke go broke" trotted out here by those who have decided to make their messy divorce everybody else's problem.

Even if such declarations that "*Magic* is dead" occur every time a product bombs or a game system is reworked without the company collapsing or the game actually dying, for many people the death of *Magic* has already happened in a more abstract capacity.

Of course, the dialectic also teaches us that there are no fixed states of things. The "death" of a game, certainly an analogue one like *Magic*, is hardly ever a definite thing. Even if WOTC closed their doors forever tomorrow, *Magic* wouldn't be dead. *Netrunner*, another card game designed by Richard Garfield, has been out of production since WOTC failed to renew Fantasy Flight Games' licence to produce it back in 2018. But, since then a community oriented nonprofit, Null Signal Games[12], has unofficially produced expansions, run tournaments, maintains ban-lists and keeps the game ticking along. Having spoken to some people who still play it, ticking along better now than ever before. *Netrunner* is dead, long live *Netrunner*.

In that vein, how many commander evenings do you attend that have no WOTC sanctioning? Would you simply never pick your cards up again if you knew no more were being officially made? If a ball rolls to you in the park, do you feel a desire to boot it back to the group who lost it, even though there's no intrinsic motive beyond play guiding you to do so? Well, do you? You debauched communist gay?

Of course the death of the companies that produce *Magic* is as inevitable as the setting of the sun. Decay is inexorable, even if it really doesn't need to be hastened quite as fast as it

[11] https://scryfall.com/card/acr/25/ezio-auditore-da-firenze
[12] https://nullsignal.games/

arguably is right now. But that's not what interests me, I want to talk about something more ephemeral: what the state of the game says about the systems under which it is produced.

[TV Static] "It's a handful. But nothing worth doing is easy." [TV Static]

But before we get too high and mighty, let us not pretend we are made of stone. We each have childhood joys, memories of media from our youth, and foundational texts that changed how we came to understand the world around us. It would be a delight and a treat for *Magic*, this game that we all love to play in one way or another, to be a medium to explore those artefacts again, and to introduce them to new people.

Never do I have a conversation about Universes Beyond with players, no matter how much they hate the concept, where they don't volunteer the exception to their distaste. "Universes Beyond is the death of *Magic: the Gathering*" they say, shortly followed by "But if they made a Master Chief Secret Lair, I'm all in baby! Wild horses couldn't hold me back!"

So to lay my cards on the table, if you'll pardon the pun,- And you will. This is my channel. You will do what I say.

Here is the list of Universes Beyond that, no matter what I'm about to say in the rest of this video, I could not help but be excited to see in print.

Doctor Who was already a big one, Tennant & Tate gave formative performances, but Eccleston has grown to be my favourite doctor as time goes on. His episodes are still phenomenal and I've even gone so far as to make a fun extra-upkeeps commander deck[13] based on him.

For the rest, they are mainly other articles of British media,- You know, back when our cultural exports varied beyond Harry Potter remake-slop, and game shows poorly masquerading as social experiments.

Ooh! Will a series of perfect strangers lie to eachother for a life changing amount of money? Er, yeah, of course they will Claudia. Olive oil costs $13 a litre at Big Tesco. It's either betrayal or revolution. Which way, western man?

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[13] https://scryfall.com/@Spice8Rack/decks/8ea0230a-56ac-4492-9907-288355f62001

Personally, I'd be unashamedly excited to see the following: Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* would be a treat, ideally in a revitalised silver border. I would literally never stop drafting a standard legal set exploring Discworld. Taking a slight non-UK tangent, 4 Souls-Series commander decks, based on Bolitaria, Lordran, Drangleic, & Yarnham, would allow me to stall my EDH pods by recycle Hbomberguy's correct opinions about DS2 being the best game in the series. Returning to this awful country, I would positively perish to see British children's TV characters put to card stock. The Clangers, Dick & Dom in Da Bungalow, Mr. Ben, Bagpus, *Mr Blobby*, Thomas the Tank Engine, etc. The *Sandman* books would also be a great source of-

What was that? Who's Mr. Blobby? You,- you don't know Mr. Blobby?

Oh. Oh, ye unsullied youth. Ye unsuspecting student. Gather thyself, and prepare to sup the nectar of education.

[Hideous laughter and rising clown music]

Okay we've front loaded the video with enough silliness. Now it's time to talk about capitalism.

[TV static] "You're a smart one. I know you'll be okay come rain or shine." [TV static]

There is, or at least was, a kneejerk reaction and dislike of Universes Beyond. On the one hand, few people celebrated the idea of mechanically unique cards getting printed in limited quantities and with jarring artwork. It varies from subject matter to subject matter, and lessens the more this becomes normalised as what *Magic* *is* now. But still a majority of the playerbase seems unhappy with constant real-world likenesses presented in the *Magic* frame. Especially when there is pressure to remain current.

If my humans deck is the talk of the LGS, is the thing to beat whenever commander night rolls around, I'd be pretty annoyed if I now felt obliged to slot in a $50 reference[14] to a TV show that ended a decade ago into it in order to remain on top of my reputation.

Sorry, what was that? [Paper rustling]

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[14] https://scryfall.com/card/sld/143/greymond-avacyns-stalwart

The Walking Dead ran until 2022?

I guess they had to stop shooting when their main zombie actor died[15].

Magic had a consistent reality, or rather hyperreality, that many feel has been shredded by the sudden inclusion of “real world” characters. Even if this isn’t actually the first time such an event has happened. Images like Albert Einstein appearing on a Legends[16] card, the seldom reprinted Portal: Three Kingdoms cards which explored the historic legends of the Three Kingdoms era of Chinese history[17], and the occasional celebrity lookalike[18] were either lampooned as missteps, enjoyed as happy accidents, or acknowledged as experiments not to be repeated. They were never considered particularly impactful; easy to dismiss by those who wished to, fun to cherish for everybody else.

One fascinating way that *Magic* unabrasively yet unambiguously consolidated elements from the real world into the game is through depictions of players, and other community members, in card art. Beginning in 1996- the year I was born, by the way, player invitational cards were designed to commemorate the winners of the annual *Magic* Invitational Tournament, a competition between a curated roster of pro-players. It took some time for each card to go from design to print with the first ever invitational card taking 5 years to release[19], but eventually the likenesses of the winners of these tournaments would be officially introduced into the game.

Sylvan Safekeeper[20], Snapcaster Mage[21], and the deeply apt Solemn Simulacrum[22] were unmarked commemorations of some of *Magic*’s best players. This program saw a decade long hiatus after 2007, but returned in 2019 to celebrate the winners of *Magic*’s World Championships; complete with commemorative flavour text[23], demarcated from the rest of the card through a faint horizontal line.

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15 https://www.businessinsider.com/prince-philip-cause-of-death-certificate-old-age-2021-5?r=US&IR=T

16 https://scryfall.com/card/leg/31/presence-of-the-master

17 https://scryfall.com/sets/ptk

18 https://cdn.ebaumsworld.com/mediaFiles/picture/2245423/84007315.jpg

19 https://github.com/maxmakesmagic/ormos/blob/main/archive/en/articles/archive/2002/06/five-years-making-2002-06-10.md

20 https://scryfall.com/card/jud/133/sylvan-safekeeper

21 https://scryfall.com/card/isd/78/snapcaster-mage

22 https://scryfall.com/card/mrd/245/solemn-simulacrum

23 https://scryfall.com/card/eld/124/fervent-champion

In the reception to these cards we see the inverse of the disdain aimed towards Universes Beyond products. They are fondly remembered, and I recall the news that they would be returning was met with jubilation. They were also viewed as being particularly prestigious accomplishments, where that pedigree ought to be reflected in their power in game. Much maligning was made when, for example, Terry Soh's player invitational card, Rakdos Augermage[24], lacked the impact of the cards that came before and after it, sandwidged as it was between Bob Maher on Dark Confidant[25] and Antoine Ruel in Ranger of Eos[26]. Players, it seemed, wanted their admired professionals to have their likeness printed on cards that would, themselves, go on to win tournaments.

Even more interesting, when these cards began to see reprints with updated & in-universe artwork, there was player contention as to if this was appropriate. In online forums at the time Dark Confidant, colloquially referred to as Bob in reference to the player whose card it was, was announced to be reprinted in the first *Modern Masters* set with new artwork, some players called the move a slap in the face[27]. People still wishing they used Bob Maher's likeness in a new piece of art for the card, and others hoping that people wouldn't call the new art confidant 'bob'. There's a preciousness to it, an empathy extended by fans who would cherish the cards they were printed on if only they were so lucky to be acknowledged and immortalised by *Wizards of the Coast*.

There are other ways in which texts outside of *Magic* have been incorporated into the game without friction. References to famous artwork like *American Gothic*[28], photographs like *Lunch Atop A Skyscraper*[29], real world holidays like *All Hallow's Eve*[30], and video games like *Plants vs Zombies*[31] have all made their way into the game, either in artistic or mechanical reference. M15 went even further, producing an experimental series of cards designed by popular figures within contemporary gaming culture.

Edmund McMillen, one of the key designers behind games like *The Binding of Issac* helped to create the card Cruel Sadist[32], a similarly troubled and violent child. The creators of *Penny*

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[24] https://scryfall.com/card/dis/127/rakdos-augermage
[25] https://scryfall.com/card/rav/81/dark-confidant
[26] https://scryfall.com/card/ala/21/ranger-of-eos
[27] https://www.mtgsalvation.com/forums/magic-fundamentals/magic-general/478694-dark-confidant-art-poll?page=3 (gangstah mizzums)
[28] https://tagger.scryfall.com/card/wth/112
[29] https://tagger.scryfall.com/card/snc/216
[30] https://scryfall.com/card/leg/88/all-hallows-eve
[31] https://scryfall.com/card/isd/184/grave-bramble
[32] https://scryfall.com/card/m15/93/cruel-sadist

Arcade helped to produce Avarice Amulet[33], an artefact which continually changes hands when the creature it's equipped to dies, a reference to a *Pac-Man* watch which the characters of the story covet, steal, and harm each other over. And Markus Persson, creator of *Minecraft*, helped create Aggressive Mining[34] whose art and mechanics encouraged the destruction of notably cubic land. A not so subtle reference to how Persson destroyed his reputation by continuing to dig into new depths of conspiratorial transphobia & racism.

There was even a card designed by the "*Magic* Community"[35], where rules text submissions were put to a public vote, eventually creating one of the most interesting discard combo pieces of all time. This card is also the only time that *Magic* has been referenced on card-stock outside of unofficial *Magic* productions and silver border parody sets.

But all of these examples beg the question: Why did all of these forms of reality bleeding into *Magic* fail to produce the kind of uproar and continued displeasure that Universes Beyond products do? Where sometimes their *removal* from the game is actually the cause of discontent?

Well, it's because all of these either fail to challenge the hyperreality of *Magic*, or have already been captured by it. Hyperreality, a term coined by postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillad,-

Er, for the record I do realise that's not how it said. Um, but I did spend my entire Mill vs Discard video citing "Michael" Foucalt, er, so I'm just gonna lean into it and, from here on out, I'm gonna get the names of specifically French philosophers purposefully wrong.

Hyperreality refers to a situation where signs of the real have substituted the real in our world. As an example: *American Gothic*, pastiched twice in artwork throughout *Magic*'s history, became such a touchstone for contemporary American culture that its recognisability, its value as a sign, has triumphed over its value as a piece of art. The orcs and zombies assuming the stances of Grant Wood's Iowan farmers do not jar with our understanding of *Magic*'s game world, because *American Gothic* has become a floating signifier, standing for nothing and infinitely interpretable, seamless to co-opt into reality or fiction. Becoming hyperreal. Its twice-simulated replication in a world-beyond-earth as easy to accept as the

[33] https://scryfall.com/card/m15/212/avarice-amulet
[34] https://scryfall.com/card/m15/127/aggressive-mining
[35] https://scryfall.com/card/m15/122/waste-not

overalls worn and pitchforks wielded by the subjects of these pieces. As normal and expected as the existence of fire and men who ruin everything.

Player, creator, and commentator likenesses can also be included in this analysis. Just as with how reality television produces discourses around exaggerated societal tensions, the careers and likenesses of famous Magic players, designers, and commentators are one and the same with the game-world of *Magic*. “Bob” is so called because Dark Confidant has Bob Maher on it. It is his card. It is him.

Magic’s world is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest, the “community”, which surrounds it is real. But this is no longer, if it ever has been, the case. These cards, in part, betray that. The “real” world which surrounds *Magic*, gameplay performances, video essays, professional tournaments, in-jokes, drama, etc. are all still part of the simulation.

Not a simulation in the sense that this is all orchestrated & designed by some malevolent higher power, you understand. We’re engaging in postmodernism here, not Andrew Tate bollocks.

Simulation in the sense that this “community” is as much a part of the narrative of this game, as the game is itself. Driven by new consumption of new simulacra: replications and replacements of reality.

This is an uncomfortable thing to consider, just how much of our enjoyment of this game, pleasure in general, is entrenched in hyperreality, a subject for bourgeois colonisation. How real jokes around plastic LGS tables about forgotten curiosities of *Magic*’s past[36] transfer to forums, to be picked up by designers, to be turned into new commodities[37] for purchase. Simulacra of that original moment of connection. How much joy is lost as a result of being officially sanctioned & marketised. How much of this game, its mechanics, story, & events, are brought to life through focus groups, model simulations, and market research as opposed to passionate spontaneity? How much of a source of joy for thousands of us is organised by the same principles that gave us the Gatewatch *Hotpockets*[38]?

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[36] https://scryfall.com/card/mir/208/brushwagg
[37] https://scryfall.com/card/iko/143/almighty-brushwagg
[38] https://www.reddit.com/r/mtg/comments/18vu3u2/what_in_heliods_name_is_this/

I myself am a part of this hyperreality. I am called by my online name in person, talked to about my videos, thanked by some for using my voice for certain issues, verbally abused and sometimes threatened with violence by others for those same issues. Fan art has been produced of me in the *Magic* canon. I'm sponsored by a company which distributes *Magic: the Gathering* product. I am a connecting pipe in the sewer of commerce…

And if YOU'D like to bling out Your commander deck with all the hottest new IP tie-ins then boy howdy do I have a deal for you.

CoolStuffInc.com has got all your sealed, single, and ancillary needs covered. Be it for Magic the Gathering, Pokemon, the One Piece card game, and many, many more.

By using my code SPICE at the checkout you can knock a juicy 5% off any purchase you make with them. Why not pick up some *Fallout* cards whilst you're there?

Experience a veritable tesseract of layered sign values with a Ravages of War, a collectable card wherein a parody of 1950's cold-war infocartoons pastiches the closing scene of *Planet of the Apes*, the simulacra of his simulacra broken and rusting on the shoreline. A reference couched in a simulation, itself a simulacra of feigned American egalitarianism. And you can get yours in foil NOW for $27.99 and 5% off your order with code SPICE. This is not a bit, this is a real brand integration with CoolStuffInc.com!

You maniacs, you blew it up. Damn you. Damn you all to hell.

When additions to this game challenge the bounds of *Magic*'s hyperreality there is an extreme reaction: either negative, bemoaning the death of the game, or strange gallows euphoria, laughing as the shark jumps get ever more ridiculous. I remember sitting in my old office,- a 4ft wide cupboard my at-the-time landlord had laughably passed off as a 3rd bedroom- and giggling with glee when the *Magic* x *Fortnite* secret lair was announced. Guffawing as I would if I were watching a death scene in a movie whose shot composition and choreography rendered it unintentionally hilarious.

[Squeeky toy honks]

Some narratives fit into the game with ease: *Lord of the Rings* is still high fantasy, and its halflings, elves, and orcs do not break our immersion in this multiverse, even if the Universes Beyond frame and holofoil do. *Adventures in the Forgotten Realms* too slots neatly into

Magic's hyperreality, although Michelle Rodriguez & Chris Pine's undeniable likenesses[39] fray the edges of acceptability. *The Walking Dead*, *Stranger Things*, *Assassin's Creed*, and the upcoming *Marvel* collaborations, however - all set more-or-less on Earth - shatter the lie: as if the fences around Disneyland fell to reveal the cold carparks beyond.

There's a definite sense of being late to the party as well, of products out-of-time, produced long after their licensing rights were hot deals, & unable to envision future media connections. *Assassins Creed* as a franchise saw its critical heyday come and go in the 2010s, its games are now busywork simulators akin to *Ghost of Tsushima*, *Far Cry*, and other white bread Ubisoft-esq sludge buckets designed to hold attention, not challenge it. Seeing *Magic: the Gathering* hype up an Altaïr card in the year of our lord 2024 feels like watching an awards ceremony hosted by an actor you could have sworn died years ago.

The Walking Dead, *Fallout*, *Street Fighter*, *Transformers*, *Marvel*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Doctor Who*, *Godzilla*, *Jurassic Park*. Artefacts that remain beloved largely in spite of their most recent contributions to the cultural landscape, not because of them. There is certainly nostalgic joy derived from seeing Davros[40], Yes Man[41], and Ian Malcom[42]. But there's no sense of the future here. *Magic* isn't asking us to watch the rise of a new star, rather just to remember ones that used to shine brighter. Indeed, the only two IPs that *Magic* has tied in that seem to be on-the-rise in a meaningful way are *Warhammer 40k*[43] and *Baldur's Gate*[44], the former plainly having one of the most competent marketing teams working in game-worlds today,- mostly[45], and the latter being directly connected with *Wizards of the Coast* already, allowing for sneak previews into at-the-time unreleased material.

[TV Static] "The land is more than just dirt. If you look after it, it'll feed you forever." [TV Static]

But, in what is potentially the biggest "hear me out" moment of my career, I think that Universes Beyond actually contains some amazing elements.

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39 https://scryfall.com/search?q=art%3Areal-life-reference+art%3Asword-coast&unique=art&as=grid&order=name

40 https://scryfall.com/card/who/1/davros-dalek-creator

41 https://scryfall.com/card/pip/29/yes-man-personal-securitron

42 https://scryfall.com/card/rex/13/ian-malcolm-chaotician

43 https://scryfall.com/sets/40k

44 https://scryfall.com/sets/clb

45 https://www.warhammer-community.com/2024/03/04/spread-the-imperial-truth-to-call-of-duty-in-a-new-warhammer-40000-collaboration/

I'm not just saying that it produces a lot of money. That's undeniable, but also isn't the point. Not all things that are profitable are good: Landlordism, Starbucks Coffee, the *Modern Warfare* series, etc. and not all good things are, or even should be, profitable: Healthcare, most art throughout history, and my habit of sleeping with the parents of everyone who leaves rude comments under my videos

Oh, and thanks again for the great night Madeline. Tell your son to stop being a transphobe and I'll call you back.

[Glass shattering]

But even putting money aside, Universes Beyond does good for the game, both from a player-base angle and also a design perspective. To begin with the former, one of the biggest social positives that arises from Universes Beyond is that it brings people into the game who otherwise wouldn't have thought twice about it. I'm beginning to lose track of how many people in my life who I've only managed to talk to about *Magic* because their favourite show is part of it now. I've spent many an hour showing people their favourite *Doctor Who* companion on my phone, explaining what their rules mean, and watching them light up with intrigue and questions about both that specific product, but also about the game as a whole. I have friends who play at my LGS who are there because they loved the art of Galadriel[46] and, call me an Anarcho-Tanko Pinko-Hearted Shit-Lib, but I love my friends and getting to share a game that I love with them, is thrilling and good.

It also serves a reverse function as well. I'm the kind of awful societal parasite that has recognised and consumed most of the outside-IPs that have been part of Universes Beyond. But I enjoyed exploring the snippets of text lifted from Tolkien's original work, which I have never read, that made their way onto the *Lord of the Rings* cards, and I know many other people whose first experience with *Warhammer 40,000* was through these commander decks. Admittedly, it was also very funny when *Magic* players looked at Severina Raine and were shocked by her plainly fascistic attire.

It is a truly curious feeling watching someone visibly recoil as you explain that: behind these fun miniatures I like to roll dice to move there lies the Imperium of Man's arcane and xenophobic eugenics. But it also gives me a great opportunity to talk with them about the

[46] https://scryfall.com/card/ltc/3/galadriel-elven-queen

amazing creative writing of that world and, namely the Orks. How all their technology runs off of the power of manifestation: And, no, not magic manifestation, *The Secret* manifestation.

Their physics defying vehicles and weaponry solely function because they believe that they will. How they originally were based off of British football hooligans, and how it's a popular myth that their leader's name, Ghazzghkull Mag Uruk Thraka, is based on Margaret Thatcher. But Andy Chambers, one of 40k's original authors and game designers, has since revealed that the similarity is just a happy accident that grew out of live roleplaying[47]. To quote "No Maggie here, we were doing our best to forget about the wicked witch", thus satisfying the hearts and minds of both trivia pedants and leftists the world over.

Also: No. I will never make a video about 40k. It is one of the few joys of my life I have yet to monitise. When I die there will be a sliver of my soul unsullied in the name of commodification.

Universes Beyond is also a fascinating treasure-trove for ludonarrative analysis. *Magic*'s story is multifaceted, convoluted, and only selectively good. As I talked about in my short little Tarkir video, Ugin and Bolas' mirroring of each other in their planeswalker mechanics was an appropriate and satisfying gameplay decision because of their significance and relation to each other in the story of the game. If you don't pay attention to the story, however, these subtleties will be lost, and *Magic*'s story has of late held an unfortunate reputation of not being worth your attention. This is being rectified, slowly and often in spite of the narrative direction itself. But until confidence is properly restored in the story, most people will only know about key details if they're conveyed on a cardboard game piece. Like how Niv Mizzet is planning on turning Ravnica into a new multiversal hub through manipulating omenpaths. Honestly, how many of you watching knew that?

Conversely, because most of the texts WOTC is plumbing for Universes Beyond are mainstream, at least in dork circles, the characters and stories are recognisable, if not known beat for beat. As a result, it's easier to appreciate ludonarrative cohesion, or at least a translation of gameplay mechanics, from one medium to the other.

As a *40k* fan, seeing how Lucius the Eternal's iconic Armour of Shrieking Souls[48], a chaos artefact that dooms whoever slays Lucius in battle to slowly transform into him, is translated

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47 https://www.reddit.com/r/Grimdank/comments/c8tkfo/i_saw_an_injustice_done_to_a_fellow_grimdank/

48 https://scryfall.com/card/40k/130/lucius-the-eternal

onto his card which makes a creature bring him back when it dies is fascinating to see. Or how of course the Sisters of Battle[49] cards would be printed with the Miracle mechanic to reflect their own Miracle Dice in game. Or how Trazyn the Infinite's[50] Necrotic Ooze esq ability mirrors the command he holds over his unending galleries of suspended artifacts and aliens. His Deathtouch ability, representing how even the largest titan can be put into the graveyard by him, i.e. added to his collection, fills me with glee. Jesus, *The Infinite and The Divine* is such a good book. I know that's, like, an entry level *40k* story but my God did it ever live up to the hype… Fuck it, okay so spoilers: Orakin the Diviner is a chronomancer, right, and he's always had beef with Trazyn because he thinks the latter forced him into the process of Necron Biotransferrance. So-

[Door slams]

Rohan, I am in the middle of filming.

"You promised you wouldn't make any *40k* videos. You promised!

How did you know I said that?

Is that a gun?

There is a long tradition of Magic players producing custom cards simulating their favourite media texts. Type "Darth Vader MTG" into google images and you'll be crushed under an avalanche of players' homemade submissions. Some, such as Turn2SolRing's post to r/custommagic[51] shows Anakin transforming into Vader upon his death. The narrative throughline of Skywalker's aggressiveness in both forms is shown through how both sides of the card must attack each turn. But the combat style is shown to develop through different keywords. Anakin is reckless but deft, having haste and vigilance. Vader is absolutely terrifying, difficult to beat in 1 on 1 combat, and an unstoppable force, having menace, first strike, and trample.

Others, like Nickmadaus64's submission to MTGNexus[52] focuses on key story beats from *A New Hope*; Vader is still terrifying, having Menace, but here goads a creature when he enters the battlefield, a reference to the immediate nemesis status he attains in the eyes of

[49] https://scryfall.com/card/40k/20/zephyrim
[50] https://scryfall.com/card/40k/65/trazyn-the-infinite
[51] https://www.reddit.com/r/custommagic/comments/oln9b3/anakin_skywalkerdarth_vader/
[52] https://www.mtgnexus.com/customcards/2028-dark-side-of-the/11171-darth-vader/

Luke Skywalker, and for 3 mana you can tap him to give a creature -2/-2, a gameplay rendition of his famous force choke.

So it is cool and interesting, no matter your perspective on the product range itself, to see what professional games designers can do in this same field with custom art, new mechanics, or fitting reprints.

On that topic, Universes Beyond is one of my favourite places to see *Magic* cards reprinted within new narrative contexts, something that I generally love to see regardless of the product line. Hero's Downfall[53], once a chase rare & now a decent draft uncommon, indeed how times change, was first printed in *Theros* with art depicting an Akroan champion being bested by a minotaur of Mogis. In everybody's favourite set, *Crimson Vow*, this card saw a reprint[54] depicting the moment that Odrik, a hero of the Church of Avacyn, was transformed into a vampire. The meaning of a "hero's downfall" expertly tweaked from a literal to more metaphorical demise.

In regards to Universes Beyond: Martial Coup[55] is a card that has never made a huge amount of sense to me. A coup means the overthrowing of governmental power by military force, and often, but not always, in contradiction to the will of the masses a.k.a the US backed coup in Chile, or the US organised coup in Iran, or the US backed coup in Argentina, or the US backed coup in Haiti, or the US backed coup in-

Yet the art & flavour of Martial Coup has little to do with the army turning on power structures but, rather, a people unifying to fight an invading threat. This has always deeply bothered me in a way that I assume is normal, and so when I saw that Martial Coup had been reprinted in the Commander Decks[56] with art depicting the conclusion of the *New Vegas* questline "Still in the Dark" in which you can lead Head Paladin Hardin to, indeed, stage a martial coup against the leadership of Elder McNamara, the art and mechanics suddenly connected with the name. Martial Coup, at last, depicted a Martial Coup! Both the card & I finally felt complete. Again, in a way that I assume is normal.

Just as a bit of fun, here are some of the other brilliantly thematic reprints that I love from Universes Beyond: Rancor[57] depicting the violent grannies who attack you in freeside when

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[53] https://scryfall.com/card/ths/90/heros-downfall
[54] https://scryfall.com/card/vow/120/heros-downfall
[55] https://scryfall.com/card/con/11/martial-coup
[56] https://scryfall.com/card/pip/167/martial-coup
[57] https://scryfall.com/card/pip/205/rancor

playing with the Wild Wasteland quirk in *Fallout: New Vegas*. Farewell[58] featuring my distant familial relation David Tennant complete with gut-wrenching flavour text. Shiny Impetus[59] depicting Gollum goaded and fleeing with The One Ring. A Leman Russ[60] retrofitted into a tractor on an Imperial Agriworld in Swords to Ploughshares. A Tzeench flavoured Chaos Warp[61]. A Genestealer's Voxcaster[62] as a Herald's Horn. A Necron themed Desert of the Glorified[63], Vault of Whispers[64], and a C'tan shard as their Caged Sun[65]. This Panharmonicon Harmonica[66].

Some cards were, seemingly, made to retain relevance across multiple worlds of reference. Like, sorry whoever was the worker to notice that Puresteel Paladin was a slam dunk fit for a *Fallout* tie-in[67], both in name and in ability, absolutely crushed the assignment.

Universes Beyond has also generated Universes Within: canon replications of these outside-IP cards, within the scope of *Magic*'s own world. Did you enjoy the mechanics of Chun-Li, Countless Kicks[68], but don't want to be the person bringing a tie-in deck to your commander game night? Well Zethi, Arcane Blademaster[69] has you covered, trading a more in-keeping *Magic* aesthetic for an admittedly a less flavourful multikicker.

It's fascinating to see authenticity played out like this: Zethi appears to be the original *Magic* card in comparison to the presumed fan-made Chun Li version, but the reality is inverted. Indeed, before these official Universes Within versions, proxy artists such as ForceOfWilko were producing canon renditions of these external IP card: such as Algenun and Linden Kenrith as a proxy for Rick, Steadfast Leader. There's something quite beautiful about the unending creativity of *Magic* players, first taking *Magic* mechanics to ape their favourite characters and texts, then retrofitting these Universe Beyond cards into fitting and appropriate slots in *Magic*'s canon. In both cases feeling naturally less polished. But also having far more heart.

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[58] https://scryfall.com/card/who/207/farewell
[59] https://scryfall.com/card/ltc/227/shiny-impetus
[60] https://scryfall.com/card/40k/190/swords-to-plowshares
[61] https://scryfall.com/card/40k/205/chaos-warp
[62] https://scryfall.com/card/40k/241/heralds-horn
[63] https://scryfall.com/card/40k/275/desert-of-the-glorified
[64] https://scryfall.com/card/40k/305/vault-of-whispers
[65] https://scryfall.com/card/40k/231/caged-sun
[66] https://scryfall.com/card/pip/765/panharmonicon
[67] https://scryfall.com/card/pip/698/puresteel-paladin
[68] https://scryfall.com/card/sld/432/zethi-arcane-blademaster
[69] https://scryfall.com/card/slx/17/zethi-arcane-blademaster

Universes Beyond is also, surprisingly, the home of most of *Magic*'s more interesting current designs. It's strange that the most aesthetically derivative product in *Magic*'s history is producing some of its most innovative cards and mechanics. But I'll never be saddened by experimentation and, upon examination, it becomes more clear why this has lately been the case with Universes Beyond more than canon *Magic*.

Rad Counters[70] are a great example. *Fallout* cards, such as The Wise Mothman[71] give you Rad Counters which cause you to mill cards at the start of your main phase for each Rad Counter on you, losing life and counters for each nonland card you milled this way. This is a phenomenal representation of both real world radiation, whose halflife causes it to dissipate over time but which still addles your body and mind as you suffer from it. As well as the gamified version of radiation found in the *Fallout* series, which lowers your stats and health the more irradiated you become. I struggle to think of what the Rad Counter mechanic could have represented, other than radiation, outside of the Universes Beyond line which would have clicked nearly as well as this. Would we have gotten this interesting take on mill had we not visited America circa 2026?

It's not just whole mechanics, but also individual cards like River Song[72] whose entire mechanical identity is about messing with basic direction of *Magic* gameplay, namely where you draw your cards from and if you should search your library. This mirrors her existence as a time travelling anomaly in the world of *Doctor Who*. Only several seasons of her character being developed, the wife of The Doctor doomed to meet her one-day spouse in reverse, could have made these mechanics make sense.

My inner cynic also feels like if I were a worker made to produce IP tie ins for *Magic: The Gathering* as opposed to original world building, I would at least demand to supplement the stifling of my creativity by being allowed to cut loose in the gameplay mechanics department. You know, if you're gonna force me to produce *Peter Jackson's King Kong the Official Game of the Movie*, you better believe I'm gonna find a way to shoehorn in: Gorgeous graphics, the entire original cast as voice actors, and innovative enemy pathing AI to appease my inner artist… I've been watching a lot of Noodle lately.

Also, what the fuck was I talking about?

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[70] https://scryfall.com/card/tpip/22/radiation
[71] https://scryfall.com/card/pip/4/the-wise-mothman
[72] https://scryfall.com/card/who/152/river-song

I compare these complicated mechanics, which make so much sense on this developed characters or more metaversal concepts with the ostensibly straightforward mechanics on side-characters from recent in-universe *Magic* expansions, and find myself wanting. Yarus, Roar of the Old Gods[73], for example, benefits your face down creatures for seemingly no narrative reason. His character is all about summoning great and terrible avatars of nature to raze the city of Ravnica to the ground, so why his card is designed to benefit your film-noir style disguised creatures is baffling.

It should also be noted that, whilst may people have been brought into the game space through Universes Beyond, and have been encouraged to engage with old media they may well have missed for one reason or another growing up, the product has turned a great number off people off *Magic*.Taking a principled position of voting with one's wallet and not buying external IP tie-in products, if not quitting the game entirely. Whilst everyone's reasoning on this issue will be unique, the polarisation is quite stark. It also echoes italian philosopher Paolo Virno's sentiment that "the most brazen cynicism is accompanied by the most unrestrained sentimentalism"[74]. One could extend this analysis to a comparison of how the sentimentality of Universes Beyond provokes cynicism in the game's playerbase, or, indeed, how sentimentality is cynically utilised in Universes Beyond for no other reason than to generate reliable capital bumps for *Wizards*.

[TV Static] "And remember; a business is only as good as its people, so treat them well." [TV Static]

This, unfortunately, leads us on to discussing how the rest of *Magic* suffers in the shadow of this nutribullet blend of modern entertainment.

Outlaws of Thunder Junction[75] is a doubly empty world[76]. Firstly as a realm that exists solely to pit "iconic" villainous *Magic* characters against eachother on a *Super Smash Bros.* backdrop of the Wild West. Malcolm, a siren pirate from Ixalan, cavorts alongside Selvala, an Elvish diplomat from Fiora, and Oko, a trickster fae from *Archive of Our Own*.

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[73] https://scryfall.com/card/mkm/245/yarus-roar-of-the-old-gods
[74] Paolo Virno, Ambivalence of Disenfranchisement, pg 18
[75] https://scryfall.com/search?q=e%3Aotj%2Cotp%2Cbig&order=set&as=grid&unique=prints
[76] IMPORTANT Outlaws of Thunder Junction has yet to be fully revealed, along with its story. There is a chance that everything written here will be rectified post-publication and, as such, this section is subject to change based on new information

They wear cowboy hats, and strut in spurs from sheriff offices to saloons, gunning down bandit-town-outlaws and train-car-security alike, depending on what the replayed story beat requires. No narrative matters here, none of these background characters mean anything, they exist solely to accent. Kaervek's millenia spanning hunger for planar domination & subsequent imprisoning in magical amber is transformed into a short beat of wink-&-nudge gags during a jail break sequence[77].

In one particularly telling moment in the story of this set, Kellen encounters Ashiok in a train car, both characters being part of Oko's gang of outlaws. When he reacts negatively to the image of the nightmare weaver, the pair's previous interaction being a dire fight, Oko quickly disarms the situation, saying: "Easy, kid. Whatever history you two share doesn't have a place here"[78]. A sentiment that could easily be extended to every colliding aspect of this set.

In this regard Thunder Junction isn't so much a pastiche of Westerns, but a pastiche of *Westworld*. Both the image of the ultimate theme park from that show, and indeed from *Unfinity*, whose cards like Gallary of Legends[79] jokingly presented disconnected *Magic* characters as automata lined up together for convenient amusement, is here played in earnest. Where once *War of the Spark* excited us with the prospect of planeswalkers meeting for the first time, and then *March of the Machine* disappointed us with a multiverse that failed to collide as we had hoped for, *Thunder Junction* recycles those feelings in a jarring and hollow way.

Like our setting our mechanics too are recycled. The "Outlaw"[80] grouping merely a rebranding of collected creature types akin to "Party", but with less complexity and flavour. Saddle[81] is Crew but for creatures. Plot[82] is a streamlined Foretell. There is nothing new here but we're made to feel it whilst the biggest swings of *Magic*'s contemporary are reserved to plump its new golden goose of external IPs.

Whilst mechanical experimentation can be found both in and beyond *Magic*'s multiverse, the game's in-universe canon is where the narrative alone can be brave, push boundaries, question assumptions, and go beyond the notions already explored by established media.

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[77] https://magic.wizards.com/en/news/magic-story/episode-2-the-jailbreak
[78] https://magic.wizards.com/en/news/magic-story/episode-3-a-train-to-prosperity
[79] https://scryfall.com/card/unf/213a/gallery-of-legends
[80] https://mythicspoiler.com/otj/cards/atknifepoint.html
[81] https://mythicspoiler.com/otj/cards/ornerytumblewagg.html
[82] https://mythicspoiler.com/otj/cards/irasciblewolverine.html

In *Thunder Junction*, however, we're given tokens of representation with abject thoughtlessness as to what they mean within this context. Annie Flash[83] is, on a literally skin-deep level, a First Nations woman. An erstwhile outlaw, turned lawbringer of Thunder Junction who acts as one of our principle point of view characters for the story. But representation comes with responsibility, an uncomfortable responsibility where, in order to properly represent a people, you must encounter the reason why their representation is important, and often why they have been lacking representation in the first place.

Thunder Junction, in a microcosm of liberal race-blind non-conversation politics and fiction, deigns to have its cake and eat it. Thunder Junction is not America, nor even *Westworld*. First Nations people do not exist here to be shot for sport by settlers, or to pose as exotic set dressing. Annie Flash is not subjected to bigotry or malice because of who she is, she is respected without thought towards the people she is a part of. The cruel reality of how European settlers annihilated the First Nations, driving many tribes to extinction, eradicating culture and language, and stealing communally stewarded land and transforming it into settler-bourgeois agriculture & plantations,- facilitated directly and explicitly through the labour of enslaved people,- all of which being an ongoing, unatoned process not safely relegated to the past, is of course absent.

The cowboy flicks of old, on which *Thunder Junction* is of course based, sanitise the uncomfortable parts of this reality whilst acknowledging, or even celebrating, atrocities and racisms still considered as acceptable in their contemporary cultural hegemony.

Increasingly, mass media exists which centres indigenous narratives, either directly challenging settler myths & preconceptions, both past[84], present[85], & potential[86], or telling stories beyond the framework of colonial dispossession entirely[87] and stepping into true escapism[88]. As Jacc said in our recent conversation about Tarkir:

“Anytime you're dealing with, um, like, representation in media there's- there's just, kind of, tension between, like um,- often times reality is difficult and, like, sometimes you don't want to see reality represented because you live it.”

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[83] https://www.mynewsdesk.com/uk/bastion-uk/images/annie-flash-the-veteran-artist-kieran-yanner-otj-2971387

[84] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reel_Injun

[85] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reservation_Dogs

[86] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Night_Raiders_(2021_film)

[87] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slash/Back

[88] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prey_(2022_film)

Of course, however, some settings cannot be disentangled from these realities. The Wild West, the term itself dripping with implication, is one of these. Yet its siren's call compels continued exploration… and corporate notes that pop guns still sell well in stores. *Magic* is a *game* after all.

The world builders thus aimed to create a world in which we can play without discourse, where cowboys exist purely as their marketable sign, freed from history. Because, in their "west", genocide is impossible. Thunder Junction is an empty world beyond just feeling hollow. In the lore as written, the plane was uninhabited by people until the arrival of settlers through Omenpaths[89]. In order to avoid the touchy subject of whose blood the nation which lionised cowboys is built on, and thus whose land these settler representations are settling, the foundational lie of colonisation; Terra Null, a land without people, is replicated.

This undercuts the necessarily racialised identity of Annie Flash. Wizards is proud that she is a First Nations woman, but from the First Nations of where? She is a settler from another realm, as are all of the characters in this world. Officially she is 'Atiin', a nomadic people based on the Navajo who "found their way" to Thunder Junction[90]. Whilst her picture dominates the screen at MagicCon Chicago it is said that "everyone is a newcomer to the plane", including Annie Flash.

It seems the only way Wizards could produce a Western where Native Americans are present, one saccharine & palatable to settler consumption, is to erase the "native" aspect of said Native American identity.

This is not to say there are no attempts to bring real life issues faced by first nations people into the story, but they are frustrated from the jump by the world they must be set in. Annie Flash's name, her true Atiin name, is Haseya. Her nephew Tommy calls her this in the closing lines of a side-story as he decides to leave her for the implied true home of their people. Many millions of people, first nations people absolutely included, are given or choose to use anglicised names in place of their true names for ease of assimilation with the dominant structure of white supremacy. One of thousands of subtle but pervasive ways that the identities of colonised & othered people are repressed by cultural hegemony. However, when the narrative refuses to acknowledge the reality of American colonisation, this moment is rendered airless. Why would Haseya, and presumably the other Atiin like Tommy and

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[89] Extraplanar portals through which normal Magic denizens can travel between planes
[90] https://youtu.be/CzU5u3WUIM8?si=sKrXvh5fhVj83fKZ

Wylie Duke, feel compelled to change their names when other characters in this same melting-pot setting don't? Why would it be such an emotional shock, provoking tears from Haseya, if there is not some element of sanctity to this act, some need, auto-exploitative or not, to obfuscate her true identity? We, as modern readers, understand the meaning of this quiet & radical act, but only within the context of what we know these people are supposed to represent. Their actual position in this reality, however, do not back this up as the rest of the worldbuilding is fighting tooth and nail to deny & brush away the very impetus behind this heartbreaking story beat. H.E. Edgemon, themselves an absolutely based first nations person, writes beautifully here. The guilt with which Haseya tends to her nephew's permanent wounds, wounds she holds herself responsible for, is palpable, made all the more tragic with Tommy's limited reciprocation and eventual exit from her home and care. I just wish that this writing, and that moment, could have been given a less tepid and whitewashed foundation to have sprung from.

Strangely, even alongside the depoliticised & alienised allegories for First Nations people, there are natives to Thunder Junction. Flora and fauna including the questionably sapient cactusfolk. Long are the days gone where fantasy species carried interesting and unique names, now just take the most obvious inspirational origin and staple 'folk' or 'born' or 'kin' on the end and call it a day. They have their own township of Hardbristle and are more than happy to adapt to & aid with the expansion of trade infrastructure & settler society on their "unspoiled" world. The question of if these newcomers should be taking this land and making it their own is avoided, as the only beings who could actually claim indigeneity are inhuman, a fun & unconscious replication of the settler dehumanisation of colonised people, and never given a chance articulate a line of dialogue in the entire narrative, let alone a demand for sovereignty, if they are even designed to understand or care for the concept. It is almost comedic to be *playing* the 1626 Manhattan "purchase" in an era of cultural consultancy by way of Baby Yoda.

On the topic of justification for settlements, however, it should also be noted that the narrative essentially states that the presence of settlers brought not only civilization to this plane, but the actually basic material basis for one as well. Quoting the flavour of Quick Draw: *The opening of the Omenpaths awoke the wild magic of Thunder Junction. Settlers dubbed it "thunder" and put it to use in everything from farming tools to deadly weapons.* It is one thing to present settlers bringing technology and structures that had yet to be developed by a colonised indigenous population. But to say that the land was metaphysically incapable of allowing for such projects until settlers arrived and literally awoke it's true potential is beyond the pale. It's not that oil & coal existed on Turtle Island, just not industrially exploited

by its native people. It's that oil & coal were waiting until the right people turned up on the shores before it even popped into being. Even in ardently avoiding the topic of colonisation, settler exceptionalism can simply not help but shine through. Lordy.

Mark Fisher, writing as k-punk at the time, wrote that "postmodern fascism is a disavowed fascism… just as homophobia survives as disavowed homophobia. The strategy is to refuse the identification while pursuing the political program"[91]. To that same end *Thunder Junction*, indeed the entire American project, survives as disavowed settler colonialism: 'We of course deplore that beastly practice… but the land we took is ours now, and the people who took it are heroes with six-shooters.'

According to sources I spoke to who were aware of the development of Thunder Junction, originally the world was pitched as a dystopia. A post-apocalyptic land ripped apart by portals which grew as a result of aether-infused-ecological devastation now further exploited by, essentially, arcane oil barons; settling the land and plundering resources without care for the sustained impact it will have, all with cowboy hats on. A statement on the environmental impact of, amongst other events, the American settler gold-rush, and quite the contrast to the "unspoilt" world on which *Thunder Junction* now rests.

I would highly recommend reading Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse* for further understanding on the intrinsic link between colonisation and ecological harm. Additionally, and again according to my sources, historically those attempting to realise a Wild West setting in *Magic* have, allegedly, been explicitly dissuaded from discussing or featuring the topic of colonisation in the game world during development. The reasons for this are obvious, financially motivated, cowardly, and chauvinistic considering *Magic'*s willingness to portray colonisation as it pertains the founding of other countries. For the second video in a row now: Iberian colonial vampire.

Both versions of Thunder Junction avoid the discourse of colonialism in their own ways. In the original pitch, developed before multiversal omenpaths, the people who inhabit the land are building new civilisations, but out of the ruins of their own ancestral societies. They are exploited by individual planeswalkers, but not being cleansed from or forcefully assimilated into new settler structures. In the latter official release, settlements and colonies exist, set up by a multitude of alien people, but just-so-happen to be claiming truly uninhabited land. Or,

[91] K-punk 165

at least, land inhabited by beings more players are comfortably able to dismiss the place-based needs & rights of.

Interestingly this idea of a ruined past civilisation has persisted into this new version, with the central, treasure filled Maguffin of the Vault, but without people whose ancestors built it. Indeed, the central mystery of what the Vault is is answered in the climax of the narrative when Ashiok, revealed to be Jace in disguise, kidnaps the sole living inhabitant of the Vault: baby Yoda the Second.

We have never seen this made-for-Squishmallow looking Temmo skin before, and it can only be found at mythic rarity on The Vault bonus sheet printed alongside *Outlaws*, in one of three collectable variants, scattered throughout the different kinds of booster packs which distribute the set. The forthcomingness to name this new character 'Loot, the Key to Everything' renders the card impossible to satirise. I simply mutter "what are we even doing here man?" each time I see it, and jenga another protein bar into my bug-out bag.

The child's removal from the Vault then triggers the structure to ascend into the stars, revealing itself to be a multiplanar-ship of sorts designed by, i think, the Formori. What came before in Thunder Junction first being reduced to an archeological curiosity, something that'd be wasted by the unexploitative natives. Then is transformed into a spacecraft from an advanced civilisation. Of course, the idea that complex and great projects "discovered" by settlers must secretly be the doing of aliens is a consistent trope of colonial narratives. Both are uncritical simulacra of the justifications invented by Europeans to occupy & terramorph "uncivilised" land.

I think back to what Jacc said in our Tarkir video, how the people of the colonised societies of Tarkir have been lately used only as action figures in an alien invasion plot. It saddens me that such analysis has since been wrought prophetic, but for an entire setting this time.

[TV Static] "Our job is to plant seeds. So our grandkids get to enjoy the fruits." [TV Static]

Another one of the worries espoused by Jacc and myself towards the end of our *Tarkir* video was that not only did the Tarkir we wanted to return to no longer exist in the lore, but also couldn't be done justice within *Magic*'s modern design. The single set structu re, and often suffocating presence of Universes Beyond had killed that dream. To that end, the pace and

style of contemporary *Magic* has also diminished the chance of other brilliant experiments seeing the light of day. Another Future Sight[92], for example, couldn't be made today.

The 2007 set depicting the finale of Dominaria's sallow decay into dust and salt had two kinds of cards: Normal and Future. The former almost exclusively depicted a dead world; deserts roiling under empty skies, anaemic dragons smouldering in the air, & memorials to heroes of dead ages. These cards featured a myriad of mechanics from *Magic*'s past: Kicker[93], Shadow[94], Vanishing[95], Morph[96], Bloodthirst & Flanking[97], Hellbent & Madness[98], Convoke & Buyback[99], Cycling & Flashback[100], even more. Echoes of the game that came before and presented in an appropriately withered world.

There were a number of new mechanics, of course: Flash was finally keyworded[101], Suspend[102] played with the timing and different zones of the game in a way that had only been experimented with once before in *Magic*'s history[103], and Split Second[104] referenced the often purposefully unacknowledged 'stack' of the game, a place very much Under The Hood of *Magic*'s machine where immersion goes to die via fan-belt accident. Split Second modified the rules of the stack as a zone in a way that had never been done before or since and, as we shall see, many cards in this block played with the frame of the game in ways that seem tame from today's perspective but which were unprecedented at the time. These new mechanics, one which sped up time, one which slowed it down, and one which bypassed it all together were phenomenal. These innovations coupled with a messy cavalcade of past mechanics made the message of this block clear: "The Old is Dying", said most of these cards, whilst others announced "and The New is Being Born".

Future Sights "future" cards[105] were experimental spectacles, the finale of three acts spanning the rest of the block. These were special & limited cards printed in a curved frame,

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[92] https://scryfall.com/sets/fut
[93] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/102/molten-disaster
[94] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/2/augur-il-vec
[95] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/11/lost-auramancers
[96] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/45/unblinking-bleb
[97] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/95/bogardan-lancer
[98] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/66/gibbering-descent
[99] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/138/sprout-swarm
[100] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/13/marshaling-cry
[101] https://scryfall.com/card/tsp/70/ophidian-eye
[102]
[103] https://scryfall.com/card/tmp/61/ertais-meddling
[104] https://scryfall.com/card/tsp/202/krosan-grip
[105] https://scryfall.com/search?q=is%3Afuture&unique=cards&as=grid&order=name

delightfully cemented in what cutting-edge looked like in the mid 2000's[106], with brand new mechanics, worlds, and aesthetics.

Time Spiral, the first set in the block, had printed "Time Shifted"[107] special cards; old border & old art reprints of a select few cards from *Magic*'s past, demonstrating the warping of time that was occurring in the set's story. Planar Chaos printed "Plane Shifted" cards, functional reprints of more past-*Magic* cards but shifted into new colours. A pastiche product, simultaneously looking backward and readjusting old cards into new design sensibilities, making Prodigal Sorcerer a more appropriate red card[108], Prodigal Pyromancer. But also questioning these contemporary boundaries: asking if white's monopoly on Serra Angel[109] style creatures couldn't be shared with blue, and if taxing countermagic[110] couldn't find a home in white.

Future Sight took the logical next step and blew the gasket off of "what if". Contrasting a tired world and recycled old mechanics with popping artwork & bold new ideas. Tarmogoyf[111] referenced the as yet nonexistent Planeswalker subtype, as Steamflogger Boss[112] did with Contraptions. Yixlid Jailer[113] looked forward into a new and still unexplored cenobite perma-hell world, with a graveyard hate mechanic that seemed like it was designed to combat a threat that has yet to materialise. Imperial Mask[114] told casters to give your teammate a copy of it, lacking any explanation of who a teammate could be, or what structure of play you could legally acquire one in. There were new mechanics: Poisonous[115], Fateseal[116], Delve[117], Absorb[118], Aura Swap[119], Fortify[120], Gravestorm[121], Grandeur[122]. All but a handful of whom have seen no reprints, functional or not, in products that followed. But even those that did get expanded upon needed to have satisfying pay-offs to their original

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[106] https://graphicdome.com/blog/y2k-2000s-graphic-design-trend/
[107] https://scryfall.com/sets/tsb
[108] https://scryfall.com/search?q=prodiga&unique=cards&as=grid&order=name
[109] https://scryfall.com/search?as=grid&order=name&q=serra+-type%3Abattle+%28game%3Apaper%29+pow%3D4+tou%3D4
[110] https://scryfall.com/card/plc/25/mana-tithe
[111] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/153/tarmogoyf
[112] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/121/steamflogger-boss
[113] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/93/yixlid-jailer
[114] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/23/imperial-mask
[115] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/89/snake-cult-initiation
[116] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/60/spin-into-myth
[117] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/52/logic-knot
[118] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/26/lymph-sliver
[119] https://scryfall.com/search?q=oracle%3Aswap&unique=cards&as=grid&order=name
[120] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/167/darksteel-garrison
[121] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/80/bitter-ordeal
[122] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/51/linessa-zephyr-mage

mystery. Why did it matter that Ghostfire[123] was colourless? What the fuck was a “Kithkin” and why did some seem pleasant & lovely whilst others were painted by Omar Ryaan[124]?

These cards still hold great intrigue and wonder for players old and new, with excitement rising each time it is announced that they will be reprinted in upcoming sets, like Aven Mindcensor in Amonkhet[125], or Grinning Ignus in Strixhaven[126]. It unfailingly feels like the future is arriving each time they appear for the first time in a set’s world. Some were powerful, remaking formats like invaders from an advanced century, overwhelming the present day with new technology. Others were and are simply perplexing, like reading a book written 200 years from now and failing to understand the parlance that appears to be commonplace in these new times.

Magic could make Future Sight in 2007 because the future still existed. The game was still relatively young, just over a decade old, and was still opening up to structural experiments and new formats. Now, there is nowhere for the future to hide.

Future Sight and *Modern Horizons* are often compared: love letters to *Magic*’s past, and highly advanced limited environments to play in. However, *Modern Horizons* is just the first half of *Future Sight*. Glances backwards. Nods to the past. Reimaginings of what’s come before, with little to no envisioning of what comes next.

Every “new” mechanic in *Modern Horizons 2* was a riff on an old one.. Affinity for *Tokens*[127] & Devour *Artefacts*[128]. Combinations of inherently synergistic keywords like Reinforce & Scavenge[129] or Plainscycling & Eternalise[130]. There’s nothing jarring and head-scratching here. No Blood-Shot Trainee[131] or Bridge from Below[132], no Norin the Wary[133] or Scryb Ranger[134]. Things that challenged players to work out if this bizarre, obtuse, contradictory

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[123] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/115/ghostfire
[124] https://scryfall.com/search?q=set%3Afut+type%3Akith&unique=cards&as=grid&order=name
[125] https://scryfall.com/search?as=grid&order=released&q=%21%22Aven+Mindcensor%22+include%3Aextras&unique=prints
[126] https://scryfall.com/search?as=grid&order=released&q=%21%22Grinning+Ignus%22+include%3Aextras&unique=prints
[127] https://scryfall.com/card/mh2/48/junk-winder
[128] https://scryfall.com/card/mh2/9/caprichrome
[129] https://scryfall.com/card/mh2/149/bannerhide-krushok
[130] https://scryfall.com/card/mh2/149/bannerhide-krushok
[131] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/110/bloodshot-trainee
[132] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/110/bloodshot-trainee
[133] https://scryfall.com/card/tsp/171/norin-the-wary
[134] https://scryfall.com/card/tsp/215/scryb-ranger

piece of cardstock was secretly busted or just confusingly bad. For many Future Sight cards players had to wait for them to become good. The same is simply not the case for the oxymoronically named *Modern Horizons*, where the horizon arrives the instant it is envisioned.

To be fair and balanced and unbiased and sexy. There are a handful of individually innovative cards here, ones that may form the heart of a new deck once more pieces come together. Garth One Eye[135] conjuring Black Lotus copies is an undeniable delight, and Void Mirror feels like its only one asymmetrical Possibility Storm away from becoming a hard lock combo piece. But in a sea of high powered remixes and mediocre draft filler these can't help but feel lonesome.

This, I should stress, is not the fault of lazy or unimaginative game designers. In 2013 there were 5 sets & 1 commander deck series, with a total of 9 new mechanics added into the game. 2023 there were 7 sets & 7 commander products with 18 brand new *Magic* mechanics, double that of a decade ago. Bear in mind as well, that new mechanics introduced in the old 3-block structure would often go on to form the mechanical backbone of at least 2 future sets. There is, increasingly, less and less space to innovate. There is no time to rest on broken ground, to wring every potential interesting feature from a mechanic before moving on. The designers must always be digging for new treasure.

The worlds nodded at as well are either well trodden ground, or devoid of character. The harsh, cenobite terror of Yixilid Jailor's unknown realm lies in stark contrast to the ambiguous non-place of Junkwinder's[136] trash heap. I look at Glimpse of Tomorrow[137] and wonder if I'm supposed to recognise this vista, or if this is a world yet unexplored. No one's coming from the future anymore. The time machines can't keep up.

"The slow cancellation of the future"[138] as Franco Berardi put it didn't happen overnight to *Magic*. There was, and in some ways still is, a game with a future before it. But rapid proliferation of *Magic* product has forced the arrival of the future into a pressurised nosel. Once where players would see mechanics and ideas teased out over time, we are increasingly given everything we want as rapidly as possible. Where once players seeking to build decks around niche themes would have to make tactical sacrifices or innovate using

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[135] https://scryfall.com/card/mh2/197/garth-one-eye
[136] https://scryfall.com/card/mkc/107/junk-winder
[137] https://scryfall.com/card/mh2/129/glimpse-of-tomorrow
[138] Berardi

ostensibly non-synergistic cards due to limited production, new game concepts and support are now splattered onto our proverbial overbuttered toast.

Players have been trying to make “Energy” happen in commander since Kaladesh? Here’s three new commanders[139] to play with, with at least two (in the same colours) on their way shortly. Players enjoyed the alternate win-con of Revel in Riches[140]? Print treasure cards in every set forever more, along with clues and food. Enjoying the joke of Fblthp’s many cameos[141]? Well we’ve increased them 20 fold and printed him on 3 new cards. Craving reprints? They’ll show up in The List and Remastered products.

The prevalence of Remastered products is a great cog in this futurelessness malaise. Re-exploring the Greatest Hits from old blocks and worlds like Ravnica with “nostalgia goggles” on. These are not just soulless cash-ins, but key components in our hauntological[142] now: where the cultural past persists like a ghost, filling the gaps left by the absence of the new. The retro-framed Hallowed Fountain[143] is an icon of this. A complex object which satisfies a deep longing to experience an old form again. On a primary level its existence lets new players play with game objects that they otherwise may lack access to. For those who played with the original cards, “on a deeper level, it gratifies a deeper and more properly nostalgic desire to return to [an] older period and to live its strange old aesthetic artefacts through once again”[144].

There is a dual pronged approach in *Magic*’s aesthetic design right now. New kinds of foils, frame treatments, serialisations, and alt-art collectables are pumped into the game in a doomed attempt to recapture the desire to chase scarce & shining artefacts. At the same time the old border is trotted out with increasing frequency, like an ageing heartthrob made to wither under the spotlight in order to bolster love and support for an increasingly estranged franchise. This is as desperate as it is ineffectual. A cloying for nostalgia that both frantically desecrates and pathetically reveres the game’s history.

Of course, this particular nostalgia is a false one. The retro-frame is a signifier of *Magic*’s past, but these cards never originally looked like this. The earliest printing of Ravnican cards

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139 https://scryfall.com/search?q=set%3Apip+type%3Alegendary+commander%3AURW+oracle%3A%7BE%7D&unique=cards&as=grid&order=name

140 https://scryfall.com/card/xln/117/revel-in-riches

141 https://scryfall.com/search?q=art%3Afblthp&unique=cards&as=grid&order=name

142 Don’t you DARE leave this script without clarifying what this means you self serving GHOUL

143 https://scryfall.com/card/rvr/404/hallowed-fountain

144 Jamerson - postmoderninism and consumer society

was in the modern frame[145] of *Mirrodin* onwards. It is a simulation of a simulation. The artificial crackle added under a funk LP that has never been pressed to vinyl. Time is flattened and truncated. There is the current frame, and the old frame, the singularly existing past, and the eternal now. The earliest experiments, and awkward growing pains between the two; white borders[146], washed out mana symbols[147], whatever the fuck the Portal cards whole deal was[148] etc. are forgotten. The indeterminate "past" of *Magic* canonised with a single aesthetic, adaptable based on market desires, neutered of the process of history.

Not that every reframing of the new in an old border is a shallow nostalgia grab, however. As was pointed out by one of my Patrons, there was a series of Secret Lair Planeswalker cards printed in the old border, with meandering and complicated rules text. This was both by design and due to necessity. The planeswalker card type is a symbol of modern *Magic*, a key image of the game in ascendant popularity, which warped both the game and the traditional frame around it: unbroken straight lines became curved, with elements of the character's artwork escaping from the bounds of their portrait. A technique pioneered by the tragically slain silver border sets. An entirely new text box and icons denoting the various "loyalty" abilities of the planeswalker had to be invented.

As old-bordered Dack Fayden[149], one of modern *Magic*'s more simple planeswalkers[150] demonstrates, the rules that allow these cards to function could never have worked at this game's inception. The staggeringly difficult to follow 11 lines of rules text, peppered with caveats and reminders that makes even Chains of "Mesistopholees"-[151]

Chains of "Mesistopholees"?

This shit is so complicated it makes Chains of… Me-Phi-Sto-Phe-Les look like a French Vanilla in comparison.

You have no idea how many takes I did before I just decided to say "Fuck it" and break out the phonotics-

'Phonotics'? Phenetics. Jesus Christ!

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[145] https://scryfall.com/card/dis/174/hallowed-fountain
[146] https://scryfall.com/card/9ed/243/giant-growth
[147] https://scryfall.com/card/dst/129/memnarch
[148] https://scryfall.com/card/por/18/harsh-justice
[149] https://scryfall.com/card/sld/251/dack-fayden
[150] https://scryfall.com/card/ema/199/dack-fayden
[151] https://scryfall.com/card/leg/91/chains-of-mephistopheles

Old border Dack Fayden is totally bereft of the streamlining we've come to expect from *Magic: the Gathering*. It's both a joke and a statement. It's plainly ridiculous, but in a way that states: "Look how far we've come. What we make in this game today would be unthinkable 20 years ago".

There are 7 total old-border planeswalkers. 3 from 2021, and 4 from 2022[152]. The latter grouping disappoints & undermines the former's seeming purpose by streamlining their rules text to include the clear modal writing form of modern cards[153]. Employing dashes and line breaks in a way that no truly old *Magic* card would have. These, to me, serve less the function of demonstrating *Magic*'s distance from its past, and more so simply encouraging us to view its past through those same nostalgia goggles.

The speed at which the new becomes the past in this game is startling. Oni Cult Anvil received its own old border treatment[154] a little over a year ago, and its first and only non-special treatment printing is still, at time of writing, legal in Standard. Its detailed, foreboding and brutal digital art clashing unfavourably with a frame stuck in the mid-nineties of graphic design. Like Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman* playing on the screen of a Nintendo 3DS[155]. Modern Horizons 3 boasts new cards for the Eldrazi titans, Emrakul and more, in a recently developed colourless "old-border"[156], which is just the original artefact old-border, but intentionally washed out. A nostalgia bump for a past that never existed.

Not to belabour our stay in *Modern Horizons 3*, as it has yet to fully release at time of writing, but I can't move on without pointing out how this set has all the air of *Whispers of the Old Gods*. Innocent characters from the game's past are warped by the corrupting influence of an eldritch titan. Whilst it worked for *Hearthstone*, a game which from the jump was a parody product of sorts, and whilst *Eldritch Moon* had similar beats specifically for Innistrad, this feels so much more hollow. The once truly unknowable horror of the Eldrazi, whose transparent frame, twisted artwork, and massive casting costs once cemented them as truly new and feared being are now, repackaged as reference fodder. The mystery and awe once felt is reduced to aesthetic recognisability. The Rootwalla and Goblins still act in accordance

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[152] https://scryfall.com/search?q=is%3Aold+type%3Aplaneswalker
[153] https://scryfall.com/card/slc/2013/elspeth-suns-champion
[154] https://scryfall.com/card/neo/230/oni-cult-anvil
[155] https://www.reddit.com/r/moviescirclejerk/comments/e3juzo/missed_out_on_seeing_the_irishman_in_theaters_but/
[156] https://scryfall.com/card/mh3/384/emrakul-the-world-anew

to their original drives & their original card's mechanics, they just do so with tentacles attached, and with old border special treatments.

Roughly 10% of all of *Magic*'s cards printed in the old border have been printed in the last 3 years. Almost all of them received this framing for their first time in this period, many of them seeing their first normal printing in this timeframe too. Some cards have now only been printed in special treatments. Urza, Chief Artificer[157], can only be played with in either the old border or the inaccurately named borderless versions. It has all the air of travel insurance packages which range from Gold to Diamond. Our customers deserve nothing short of constant luxury, normality is literally sometimes not an option.

Returning to Ravnica Remastered: Dark Confidant[158] saw a reprint here, with brand new art, and in the old border for the first time. It's origins as a modern-framed player invitational card overwritten to serve a bizarre concoction of simultaneous fresh-novelty and faux nostalgia. If Hallowed Fountain was first printed in the modern frame, does that make the frame of today's *Magic* cards postmodern?

[Bong rip]

Time Spiral Remastered is truly the pinnacle of this concept. A curated selection of what was supposed to be a reflection on *Magic*'s past and look into its future, now rendered in uniform sterility. The cards which made Time Spiral block unique, the bizarre game objects like the self sabotaging Volcano Hellion & hyper-specific hate piece of Tivadar Thorn,- as well as the colour shifted curiosities like Shrouded Lore & mysterious experiments like the aforementioned Imperial Mask- are mostly absent.

The Remastered product instead chose reprinted the successful cards, both those that once received special treatments like Doomsday and Tarmogoyf, and those that didn't, Pongify & Children of Korlis to name a few. Cards which have either proven themselves to be powerful game pieces in already existing decks or which form the basis of a more streamlined draft experience. In sanding off the edges of *Time Spiral* block, designers avoided player disappointment in opening double-take-worthy pieces like Force of Savagery's perplexing statline and also arguably improved the draft experience. One of the sets I consistently hear touted as modern *Magic*'s best limited environments is *Time Spiral Remastered*. But it also

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157 https://scryfall.com/search?as=grid&order=released&q=%21%22Urza%2C+Chief+Artificer%22+include%3Aextras&unique=prints

158 https://scryfall.com/card/rvr/323/dark-confidant

missed the point of what *Time Spiral* block originally represented. No longer is there the feeling that this is what *Magic* could be. That has been replaced with this is what *Magic* was and is.

As you have also noticed, the frame treatments that once differentiated future and planar shifted cards from the rest were removed and, in doing so, much of their original meaning dissolved. Justin Sweet's frightening composition on the original Blade of the Sixth Pride[159]; the hooked weapons, apocalyptic skies, flayed skin-armour and terrifying snarl of this cat is challenging. The near perfect white of the ground she stands on gives the impression that we have just snapped this picture with our camera flash, capturing the deadly speed of this warrior as she spins her head towards us before the light even dissipates. This amazing artwork wouldn't fit in the frame it was originally designed to break free from and has been replaced with a piece by Lars Grant-West[160], by no means a incompetent or meritless composition, but unfortunately conformist in comparison.

One of these cards was originally a sneak preview into *Magic*'s future, another is a colour shifted card. Laid out amongst their new contemporaries in *Time Spiral Remastered* and removed from their experimental frames, it is impossible to tell unless you have an astute understanding of established design conventions in *Magic*, or saw them in their original form. Even then, you may have forgotten. New simulacra overlaying the old.

This all comes to a head with *Time Spiral Remastered'*s remix on the Time Shifted theme. Here, cards printed around the time of, or after the original *Time Spiral*, are displayed in the retro frame. The retro frame Eternal Witness[161] asks you to remember *Magic*'s past, whilst Chris Rahn's new artwork obfuscates the uncomfortable reality of the original cards' artist and her politics. A simulacra of the original Eternal Witness, and the sole card in this series to not be printed with its original artwork. Quite the contrast to the original *Time Spiral* team's decision to reprint Enduring Renewal[162] & Darkness[163] with artwork from their original artist, as all of the Time Shifted cards were. Forgive me for engaging in lesser-evilism here, but I would argue that an artist being a secret right-winger who got caught liking reactionary & bigoted tweets & who apparently donated her own artwork to a Q-Anon conspiracy podcast so antisemitic that YouTube deleted their channel… is slightly less bad than one sharing all

[159] https://scryfall.com/card/fut/19/blade-of-the-sixth-pride
[160] https://scryfall.com/card/tsr/9/blade-of-the-sixth-pride
[161] https://scryfall.com/card/tsr/361/eternal-witness
[162] https://scryfall.com/card/tsb/7/enduring-renewal
[163] https://scryfall.com/card/tsb/40/darkness

the drawings of Swastikas[164] they've made whilst comparing Hitler to Jesus and grieving his death all on their facebook page[165].

May all Nazis' teeth rot like his have[166].

The fascinating part is that none of these cards needed to be chosen for reprinting like this. *Magic* had 50 or so sets under its belt by the time *Time Spiral* released, and well over quadruple that when it was remastered. There was no need to seek nostalgia through either a false sanitization of the past or through an honest remembrance of the multiple times you worked with one of America's most repulsive fascists. And believe me, I've seen that show that is- that is some stiff competition your man was beating out there. Fuck.

Dipping back into universes beyond we can see this sanitation come through in new ways of rewriting unreality. Ace, Fearless Rebel[167] depicts the 7th Doctor's companion striking a Dalek. We see her jacket emblazoned with badges and patches as it was in the show. But the red star on her sleeve stands out in particular. Every other adornment is busy with lettering, symbols and colours. This one is a red void, feeling out of place amongst the rest. Of course, fans of the show would know that this patch was, in fact, filled with a soviet hammer and sickle. Ace was a radical working class teenager who we are introduced to already in trouble with the British state after she burned down a house. She did so in a fit of rage after neo-nazis threw a molotov cocktail into her friend Manisha's house. Nazis, of course, being first and foremost hyper-racist anticommunists.

This card is a simulation of Ace, herself a simulation of at-the-time contemporary British & working class anxieties: the dismantling of worker & trade union power, as well as the social democratic welfare state under Thatcher, the rise of fascist movements like the British National Party and National Font, and the waning promise of a proletarian alternative as the curtains began to close on the USSR. Here the hammer and sickle symbol is scrubbed, leaving an appropriately empty star. The symbol of nebulous radicalism with all the uncomfortable & specific politics wiped clean.

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[164] https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4536265213517&set=a.1190299006453
[165] https://www.facebook.com/profile/1497711641/search?q=hitler
[166] https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10231805548750490&set=pb.1497711641.-2207520000&type=3
[167] https://scryfall.com/card/who/98/ace-fearless-rebel

Designers, at the behest of the bourgeois owner class, are compelled to explore exciting notions and artefacts, themes of rebellion and reprinted game-tools, through true nostalgia goggles: where only the positive, marketable, and discourse-free elements shall be remembered and rejoiced. Of course, the inherent irony of attempting to depoliticise remembrance is that it highlights exactly what you seek to forget.

The desire for a sterile past comes through not just from WOTC, but from the playerbase itself. When the Universes Beyond *40k* commander decks were released players were grateful for a reprint of Darkness[168] that both lowered the card's price and also came without a decaying scumfuck's artwork printed on it. This despite the fact that players have, and always have had, the power to simply proxy their own version with the artwork removed, or replaced with any artwork they so wish to see instead, for free, outside of tournament play.

Much as was the case with the initial wave of backlash against *The Walking Dead* secret lair,- where there was a self-important content mill led attempt to create a new play structure that banned the use of Universe Beyond cards. There is a desire for authority to set the parameters of the simulation. Asking for someone to not play certain cards around your table requires one to push against the imaginary bounds of *Disneyland*. It's uncomfortable. It necessitates interpersonal conflict. It is easier to be than it is to become and rather than be a bother for even a single second most of us would prefer it if our wishes were simply imposed upon us by Mickey Mouse himself.

[TV Static followed by hopeful & quaint flute music, followed by more TV static]

But do we even want the future? What on Earth does the future have in store for us? Climate catastrophe? Nuclear war? AI overriding all creativity? What does the future actually look like? When was the last time you had hope for- hell, experienced a narrative that saw the future as a hopeful place?

I see snippets from this video[169] often floating around as a positive vision of tomorrow. Socalled "Solar Punk", an identity as quickly packaged and commodified as it was named. It's an animation envisioning a bright future of clean energy, unalienated labour assisted by green technology. A community beyond family & work, public transport, and balance between the metropole and rural settlements. Here the future is a sunny Studio Gibli vision, indeed the score is even by long-time Studio Gibli composer Joe Hisaishi. It is an undeniably

[168] https://scryfall.com/card/40k/197/darkness
[169] https://youtu.be/z-Ng5ZvrDm4?si=PS9t8-ozWvOZQryE

beautiful and hopeful snapshot of what could be. The sole catch of this animation being that it's a commercial. For Yoghurt.

Once you notice it, the product placement ruptures your enjoyment. The voice over which talks about the necessity of planting seeds, of how a "business is only as good as its people", the massive fucking letters directing you to a dairy product company at the end. Even the studio responsible for this animation admit in its YouTube description that this "is not a perfect utopia", almost certainly in reference to the jarring disposable plastic dotting this otherwise sustainable vision. As the most popular comment under this video reads "In this universe, people would absolutely not be eating and drinking out of single-use chobani cups and cartons lmao"[170]. Lmao indeed. But even Dear Alice, the name of the commercial, holds more hope than *Magic*'s visions of tomorrow.

The few *Magic* worlds which explore the future do so in either terrifying or conservative ways. Many, if not all, of the individual aspects of New Phyrexia[171] are twisted parodies of historical societal pillars & ills; orthodox religion, social Darwinism, forced assimilation, etc. But the overarching theme of these New Phyrexians, 'All Will Be One', represents a fundamentally revolutionary mode of existence: a totalitarian unity synonymous with most western depictions of pure communism, intertwined with the background radiation of our proto-fascistic fear of the bodily other. The horror of the collective superseding the individual is hammered home by the cruel genetic experimentation, body modification, and brainwashing, all made possible with advanced and arcane technology.

Mirrodin[172] before it was similarly technological, but held no revelatory societal advancements. All five cultures were either rooted in semi-feudal relations, bands of noble and ignoble savages, spiritual and opportunistic sectarians, and one sole group of aspirational technocrats. The vedalken,- who I assume would be called Bluefolk or Brainkin if they were designed today, are obsessed with progress and discovery. The only people really looking forward in this world. They, in turn, become one of the first people to be swayed and overtaken by Phyrexia as it grows. The representatives of the future in this world being the harbingers of its catastrophe.

Even the outside IPs in Magic that examine the future are fraught with terror: *Fallout* and *40k*. The former displays the horrors of a nuclear apocalypse born in a cold war which has

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[170] https://youtu.be/UqJJktxCY9U?si=hQ1lIna47u2QsTKn
[171] https://scryfall.com/sets/one
[172] https://scryfall.com/sets/som

never gone away. The latter displays an utter cynicism for what comes next. Where societies whose rules and structures break away from our human past and present are either decayed or embattled by an ascendant humanity driven forward by hyper-fascism and a dogmatic rejection of curiosity & development.

The most hopeful representation of the future is found in *Kamigawa Neon Dynasty*[173], which presents an illuminated faux-Japan where spirituality and technology are interwoven. But this is a hollow hope. A replication of the modern liberal order: private property, crime, jobs, adverts, personal vehicles, etc. but with LED decals. Characters from a millenia ago still walk the streets, ancient trees shelter skyscrapers, dozens of sagas retell the tales of legends whose stories are largely reflected in the world around them. The Akki are still upstart, an emperor still rules. If you discount the Mecha and holograms, what is actually futuristic about this place?

Is the best we can hope for in the future a more illuminated and semi-real landscape to accompany our floating drive to the office? When Times Square installed its first LCD billboard, did the future arrive, or did the mundane just get a little more advanced?

When the majority of our media either looks backwards fondly or looks forward in fear, it is no surprise that we seek comfort in known unrealities. Nuclear apocalypse is terrifying, but *Fallout* is reassuring.

This is a negative-comfort though. In that it is, in reality, only the absence of the discomfort found in fighting against the status quo, both materially and culturally. As Mark Fisher lays out, & as Franco Berardi argues, the “intensity and precarity of late capitalist work culture leaves people in a state where they are simultaneously exhausted and overstimulated. The combination of precarious work and digital communication leads to a besieging of attention… Retro offers the quick and easy promise of a minimal variation on an already familiar satisfaction.”[174]

We stick with what we know because our time is stretched so thin that seeking the new is too great a challenge to pose on the gaps between labour and information overstimulation. Not that the new is even easy to seek out. A handful of near monopolistic media companies program what we watch, the distinct majority of it being sequels, remakes, reboots, universe expansion, and pastiches. Do you want to watch your superhero movie, your superhero

[173] https://scryfall.com/sets/neo
[174] Ghosts pg 15

show, or your show about why superheroes are bad, complete with all the brand tie-ins mocked its own text, itself being a sanitised remake of a shit and horrifically bigoted series of graphic novels. All of which I am sure will be coming to a Universes Beyond tie-in in 4 years time, long after the heyday of the IP's popularity.

As Fisher continues: "Despite all its rhetoric of novelty and innovation, neoliberal capitalism has gradually but systematically deprived artists of the resources necessary to produce the new. In the UK, the postwar welfare state and higher education maintenance grants constituted an indirect source of funding for most of the experiments in popular culture between the 1960's and 80's… as public service broadcasting became 'marketised', there was an increased tendency to turn out cultural productions that resembled what was already successful."[175]

Does that remind you of anything? You cannot be what you cannot see, and through the commodification of all artefacts of human endeavour: from shelter, to love, to play, we are being denied a vision of the future.

[TV Static] "So, eat well Alice. And keep planting those seeds.

Because how we eat today, feeds tomorrow." [TV static]

This all comes with the caveat that analyses of why *Magic* today is flawed should not retroactively uphold *Magic*'s past as some kind of perfect system that was only ruined when *Street Fighter* tie-ins were being made. This is just a simulation of nostalgia responding to the simulacra of nostalgia being pumped out as new old border cards.

Magic has always existed as either a commodity or aspirationally as one. This is, and was, a product to sell. Many errors have been made, and many potentials have been disregarded, in the pursuit of profit. It has, admittedly, gotten far more acute in the last 5 years. The decision to abandon the silver border in order that "un" sets would have a larger audience to market to is a pretty clear example of that in practice and also of the less than ideal effects it has had. Both on the highly criticised set itself and on formats like Legacy, currently in the grip of discourse as to how to deal with "Sticker" cards in high-level play.

[175] Ghosts pg 15

[Jim] “I’m gonna play ____ Goblin, which known as ‘Name Sticker’ Goblin in the circles that I roll in.”

[Jim] “When this creature enters the battlefield you may put a name sticker on it.”

[Jim] “This is Legacy playable. This sees play in Legacy.”

[Patrick] “I seriously feel like I’m blacking out right now.”

[Jim] “Not only legal in Legacy but, like, actively playable.”

[Patrick] “Bring at least 10 unique sticker sheets. No repeat sheets. That’s cheats!”

Of course, however, this is not to say that shrinking innovations and questionable business practices have produced a wholly bad entertainment product either. For all of my griping about *Outlaws at Thunder Junction*, or whatever the name of that set is, I’ll be the first to say that Saddle is both derivative of and an improvement on Crew. Being far more tactical and with wider design space than the latter. Games are still fun, new cards can still be interesting, designers are still creating competent and fun limited environments. The future is not dead, remember, just slowly being cancelled.

The idea that *Magic* has “sold out” as a result of Universes Beyond is also silly. Where once the game had the categorization of counter culture thrust upon it during the Satanic Panic of the 90’s, and where older stories told more unique and less-derivative tales, at least in detail if not in broad structure and message, the game & thus its marketability has always come first.

Marshal McLuhan’s erudite theory that “the medium is the message” remains significant in contemporary media analysis, and in our understanding of *Magic*. Whilst the intertwining of story and gameplay is what sets *Magic* apart from its less lore-heavy contemporaries, the story (the message) has never, and will never be, more important than the medium (the game commodity).

Fornite got a secret lair for the same reason that Annie Flash’s identity as a First Nations woman was left superficial, warped, and in the story’s background. For the same reason that, in response to the Satanic Panic, much of *Magic*’s art was changed and the Demon subtype was temporarily removed: The game sells better this way.

We've spent the last… er, amount of time bemoaning hyperreality, my place in it, the desperate futurelessness of it. But what can we actually do? Baudillard theorised that: because this stagnation of culture arose from constant marketisation and consumption, only gift giving can break free from the monotony.

"To defy the system with a g-" oh, sorry.

[In a bad French accent] "To defy the system with a gift to which it cannot respond save by its own collapse and death. Nothing, not even the system, can avoid the symbolic obligation, and it is in this trap that the only chance of catastrophe for capital remains."[176]

Oh hoh hoh!

In my interpretation: Because a gift holds symbolic value beyond expressions of exchange and use, only "countergift"s can be properly exchanged in response. A gift given to you by a loved one which set them back $50, and a gift given by another which cost them nothing beyond labour are usually ascribed different symbolic values untethered to their exchange value and responded to in kind and only with a gift itself. If social reproduction becomes more propelled by this concept of gift-exchange over exchange value, capital will simply be unable to maintain itself as the foundation of society.

Of course, however, this is easier said than done when we need money to live and, besides, capitalism has already partially commodified the concept of gift giving. We can see it in the cultural non-entity of *Fortnite*. It's currently borrowing from *Roblox*, tasking its users to create new maps, rules systems, & models that will lessen the load on the owner's capital expenditures and allow them to hire fewer & fire more workers. The encouragement of content being created for free under the guise of "community", but with the hope, if not goal, of generating surplus value from mass unpaid- oh sorry. Stolen- sorry. Voluntary child labour.

Online commentators, myself included, fall into this as well. I criticise and praise *Magic: the Gathering* in ways I believe are sound and in good faith, but I also promote the proliferation of the game. Both explicitly-

[176] Symbolic Exchange and Death

Remember, code SPICE at checkout for Coolstuffinc.com for 5% off of any order. Again, not a bit but an actual sponsor read.

But also organically. Comments under gameplay videos I appear in tell of how I got the user into the game. I am an advert for *Wizards of the Coast* that they don't have to pay for. Most everyone who makes videos like I do are the same. In critiquing the elements I feel are bad, I cannot help but uphold the good as a counterpoint: innovative mechanics, great stories, a medium to socialise and make friends through.

I think back to that Fisher quote where he's laying out Beradi's thesis on why we seek nostalgia, particularly retro. How our overstimulation of information has led us to seek familiar satisfaction. I think about the videos that I watch on YouTube. Video essays about media that I have never consumed. Video games, movies, books. I think about the videos that I make. What I'm choosing to utilise my creativity to make. Analysis about other people's products. I wonder how much of my engagement with genuine creativity- as much as it can exist under Neo Liberalism- comes regurgitated through video essay form. I wonder how much you, watching this video and presumably others that I've made also feel about this.

But we are not without hope and a means to act. Gift giving is not, cannot, be totally recuperated by capital. Indeed, the fragility of capital's stranglehold on free expression can sometimes be revealed in beautiful acts of gift giving itself.

Dear Alice has a "non-comodified"[177] version. Produced well within the bounds of transformative fair use, by *Waffle to the Left*, a video essayist from Canada. In it, all references to the dairy company have been scrubbed, the music removed, and the voiceover replaced with diegetic sounds painstakingly stitched together from creative commons files. Suddenly, the narrative presented to us in the ad, one of planting the seeds for tomorrow, of good business, and caring about the Earth- all in liminal service to the goal of selling you a philanthropist's expensive Yoghurt- is ejected. In its place we simply see a potential for the future. People collaborating, sharing food, going to school, simply existing amongst clean technology. Subtle changes such as fruit being harvested and placed in a trailer marked "COMMONS" rather than "DONATIONS" demonstrates this far more radical and revolutionary imagining of our future.

[177] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqJJktxCY9U&ab_channel=WaffleToTheLeft

The quiet peace of Waffle to the Left's remaking of *Dear Alice* is still a simulation of a simulation. Still a product in as far as it is monetized on YouTube- You'll never catch me admonishing creatives for securing the bag in a non-exploitative way under capitalism though. I'm a communist. Not a dickhead.

But this radical act of allowing the artist and animators vision of the future to step out from the shackles and shadows of the necessary corporate product placement is beautiful to behold. Even the note on the fridge at the end, the script for the original voice over, fits in with this demarketised vision. The line "a business is only as good as its people so treat them well" is pinned beside a polaroid of an old woman and a much younger Alice. But even in the original, the animation shows us not a business owner, but a co-worker. At most the matriarch of a family organisation. As a result, this line in the ad feels jarring, an obvious corporate addition. In the non-commodified version this line can instead be read as a relic of a past generation, the idea of a business, of ownership, naught but a faded memory magnetised to a fridge door.

The sky at the end, free from the company logo, is open and fast. The shot lingers here. Originally to maximise the time the branding remained on screen. But now simply holding for the sake of enjoying the view. It feels uncaged. All done for no other reason than to give the gift of the animator's art back to them, and to the world, untainted. You forget even the spelling of the word that used to block the full sky from your vision as you watch this version.

As mentioned towards the start, when *Netrunner* perished as a commodity it was unofficially resurrected by a community of fans who have maintained and developed its structures of play for no other reason than they love the game. To create, and to do, as a gift to others and to yourselves is a radical act. But what benefits others, be it maintaining infrastructure for a genuine community of people to enjoy entertainment media, or helping your friends to organise their workplaces & communities, cannot help but transform into mutual aid. To give the gift of aid to others is to, invariably, relish in the fruits of it yourself. Be it through a better experience in a game, or the increased pressure for your own company to improve working conditions, and it's through such demarketised networks that true experimentation can arise.

Demarketisation is, indeed, a necessary goal to reach in order to escape this malaise. As Mark Fisher deftly pointed out over a decade ago in response to news that Jonathan Ross, famed bigot, would be receiving an 18 million pound contract to present for the BBC:

“Imagine if [that was] instead spent - risked - on what British television most sorely lacks, writers. You could pay *scores* of writers a good wage for *years*… the BBC ought to be in a position to cushion its creative staff from the pressures of producing immediate success - and contrary to the neoliberal logic which insists that people are best motivated by fear and money, it is that cushioning which facilitates a certain kind of cultural entrepreneurialism.”[178]

I can attest to this. Almost all of the videos I’ve made which I consider to be my best have come out after my Patreon earnings rose from generous to generous-to-the-point-of-being-livable. I have the time and space to do deep dives and philosophical examinations like this because you lot subsidise my ability to disappear for months and learn to read texts I have no formal training to properly understand. But it shouldn’t just be a small group of lucky creatives, most of us well positioned already within the social and economic structures they exist in, who get to experience this chance to creatively experiment. Publicly owned and funded creative infrastructure is just one necessary step towards a more liberated creative output… and I mean genuinely publicly owned, not just tax-payer subsidised crash pads for nepo babies and client journalists, gatekept by Tories who are selling it off piecemeal to the American market which we are increasingly subservient to.

As I wrote this conclusion, Chris Cocks, the multimillionaire CEO of Hasbro who, again, oversaw the firing of over a thousand employees in the run up to Christmas - either to reach annual growth goals or… I don’t know. To make The Grinch look like a wimpy bitch - has come out and extolled the virtues of AI generated content in upcoming *Magic* and *D&D* products. AI, the misnomer attributed to machine learning image scraping software and procedural text generators, represents a new postmodern apex for simulation. Where once creatives would be pressured by the results of algorithmic analysis and market predictions to replicate culture in new montisable ways. AI does away with the pretence, and simply steals, uncredited, the work of past generations of artists, writers, editors, and innovators.

So-called AI slaps together disconnected artistic elements, or individual creatives entire portfolios, in a profane amalgam of a permanently recycled culture. A digital Hapsburg if you will.

The structure of neoliberalism frustrates our ability to envision the future and to create the new and AI, at the whim of the ruling class, enshrines this fetter as the sole and most

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[178] K-Punk 201

profitable mode of production. Imagination is unnecessary when the market desires only replication. Today, as Disneyland was to Baudrillard in the 80's, AI represents:

[In a bad French accent] "The regeneration of the imaginary as waste-treatment plants are elsewhere… Everywhere today one must recycle waste, and the dreams, the phantasms, the historical, fairylike, legendary imagination of children and adults-"

[Accent slowly transforms into a New York cabbie] "-is a waste product, the first toxic excrement of a hyperreal civilisation"[179].

Hyperreality may dominate our lives, and the lives of those around us, and both neoliberal hegemony and the fascism it incubates are designed to extort our ability and desire to give freely. But through organisation, mutual assistance, and supporting grassroots culture, born from honest agony & defiance under this system and not passed down from on high, we may yet imagine a future and bring it to bear. You have the power to picture tomorrow, and to create art that will transport you there. It may not be successful, it may only be appreciated by a dozen locals at an open mic, or 14 followers on social media, but it is yours and it is free and it is free.

Do not be comforted by the offerings of a system designed to extort you. Be comforted by the gifts of those railing against it, and join us to fight for a different way…

Okay, so the Emperor's Children are corrupted space marines who worship the chaos God Slanesh led by the serpentine and twisted primarch Fulgrim. He was corrupted by the sword-

[Wood crashing]

"You promised you wouldn't make any."
No! Rohan! No!

[Gunshot]

[179] Simulacra & Simulation pg 13