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Making Magic Believable

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The Big Question

What does this do for my story?

In everything you learn in this industry, always test it before you change your entire manuscript. Even if something works for another writer, it does not mean it will work for you. Remember, creativity is subjective. - DRAKE

Making Magic Believable

“It is said that science fiction and fantasy are two different things. Science fiction is the improbable made possible, and fantasy is the impossible made probable.”

- Rod Serling, The Twilight Zone, The Fugitive (1962)

But why use “Magic” as a plot device in the first place?

Magic Defines Fantasy.

Magic is a distinction the fantasy genre holds that sets it apart. Asking why use Magic as a plot device is like asking why write Fantasy.

Why Write Fantasy?

- I love writing and reading about magic.
- Magic adds an expected element.
- Magic enhances discovery of the story.
- Magic is visually appealing.
- Magic enriches the mood of the story.
- Magic helps facilitate the narrative.
- Magic provides a source of conflict.

The definition of Magic

-noun

The art of producing a desired effect or result through the use of incantation or various other techniques that presumably assure human control of supernatural agencies or the forces of nature

Drake's definition of Magic

Magic gives me Plot Devices I can make up instead of spending time doing research.

Before you go crazy making up Magic, let's not forget about the End Game

Never forget what your end game is. Magic is wonderful, but it is just a device to enhance your story. It should never become the story. The story of Spiderman is not a story about a guy who can stick to walls and shoot webs from his hands; it is a story of a teenager struggling to find his place in the world.

The real magic is discovering how to use magic to enhance the human elements of your story.

How do we accomplish this?

With Drake's Thirteen Thinking Points to Effective Magic Use, of course!

Thinking Point One – The Feel of Magic

Make sure that the magic fits the feel of your story.

Happy story = Happy Magic
Dark story = Dark Magic
Industrial story = Industrial Magic
etc.

Thinking Point Two – Pick Your Magic Level

Ambiguous = Magic has no/few rules.

Semi-Defined = Middle Ground between Ambiguous and Defined.

Defined = Magic has well defined rules that the readers understand.

John Campbell

“The basic nature of Fantasy is to make up a new rule any time you need it.” This is a great description of a “Ambiguous” magic system.

“Setup basic principles, then develop their consistent, logical consequences.” This is a great description of a “Defined” magic system.

Thinking Point Four – Limitations

To make magic work within most plots, and to ensure they do not become over powering, you need to add in limitations. Things magic just can't do.

Limitations are more interesting than abilities.

Any muscle-bound brute can infiltrate the home base of a powerful wizard, dispatch his guards, and destroy an ancient artifact that if left unchecked will ruin all life.

But how much more interesting would it be if the hero had a handicap? Say, is half the size of everyone else and has no fighting skills?

Spending time figuring out what magic WILL NOT do will push you as a writer to become creative during the scenes.

Magic should force you to stretch as a writer, not give you a crutch that overcomes your story's obstacles.

The Uncertainty Principle.

Limitations should force your characters (and you, by extension) to work to overcome obstacles.

This will not only build tension, keeping the readers off balance, it will also build depth to your characters ensuring they are not two-dimensional.

Thinking Point Five – Weaknesses

Weaknesses to your magic system are things that can be exploited, allowing the story to remove a character's magic ability.

Losing your wand in Harry Potter.
Not having metal to burn in Mistborn.
Kryptonite vs. Superman.

The Equalizing Principle

Weaknesses will allow the story to strike back at the heroes, which will in turn continue to build tension, keeping the story fresh.

Always be vigilant against overusing weaknesses, they will become Cliché.

Thinking Point Six – Costs

Adding a cost to your magic system can add a dimension that forces your characters to make difficult decisions that will have real, story-based consequences.

Can be a Growing Device.
Can have an Emotional Impact.

The Humanizing Principle

Costs should either make your readers struggle with the decisions your characters take, or connect the reader to the character in a visceral way.

Darth Vader vs. Rand Al'Thor

Be warned, Costs can hurt your plot.

Thinking Point Seven – Make it Visual

Magic should add an element that enhances your narration with a wonderfully exciting thing to describe.

DESCRIBE IT! Don't skimp on description.

Thinking Point Eight – Quality over Quantity

Regardless of if you are going ambiguous or detailed, having magic that only does a few things, but you really understand how magic impacts the world around your characters is better than just having magic able to do whatever it wants.

Brandon Sanderson calls this Deep vs. Wide The reality is, never lose sight of your End Game – Magic is a device you use to enhance your story. If it does too much, it can overburden the narration and turn the reader off.

Thinking Point Nine – World building - Extrapolate

Just as technology effects our world today, magic is going to effect the entire world of your story. You need to spend time contemplating this.

What happens when...?
The Death of a Chandler,
Lamp Makers (kerosene),
and the incandescent light bulb.
Think Outside the Box!!!

Thinking Point Ten – World building - Diversify

People will use things in ways you never dreamed. As the writer, you should push yourself to be just as innovative. Look for new ways to use the magic system you have instead of adding more abilities to it.

Think Outside the Box!!!

Thinking Point Eleven – World building - Interconnect

Once something becomes a tool used by society, it is going to infiltrate all of society.

Medical
Communication
Travel
Food Production / Storage
Protection
Think Outside the Box!!!

Combining 9, 10, and 11 – Remember Your End Game!

Keep in mind why you are creating a magic system for your story – to enhance your plot. Never lose site of this fact!!! Everything you do should tie into the story you are trying to tell. Waste nothing.

Think Outside the Box!!!

Thinking Point Twelve – Define its Origin

While magic should be mysterious, and you may never explain where it came from to the readers, you should figure it out for yourself.

As with creating backstory for anything, creating a backstory for your magic will help you both understand it at a deeper level, as well as giving you ideas on how to better use it during your story.
