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Worksheet

on

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

Making Magic Believable

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 we use Magic as a plot device is like asking why we write Fantasy. Within the fantasy genre, magic serves a myriad of purposes, such as adding an expected element, enhancing discovery of the story, enriching the mood of the story, helping to facilitate the narrative, and providing a source of conflict among other things. Plus, it’s visually appealing for the reader!

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's 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.

It's always about the reader.

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.

For instance, in Max Gladstone's Craft Sequence series, the stories revolve around characters' relationships with legal entities and conflicts around law. The magic, in turn, is completely based on the transfer of power in promises made through contracts

Legal story = Law magic

Exercise One

Think of one or two of your favorite fantasy stories. What is the feel of the story? How is its magic connected for you? Transcribe it below.

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.

Lord of the Rings is a great example of Ambiguous magic because the reader does not understand how magic works. You cannot use magic to solve conflicts. Think about how horrible (and short) the story would have been if Gandalf had simply teleported himself to Mount Doom and just dropped the ring in.

Harry Potter is a great example of Semi-Defined magic because the reader does understand at least the basics of how magic works. You can use magic to solve some conflicts. In the Chamber of Secrets, Fawkes brings the Sorting Hat which magically gives Harry the tool he needs to survive – The Sword of Gryffindor.

Mistborn by Brandon Sanderson is a great example of Defined magic. Through the story, readers gain a deep understanding of how magic works. Due to this, magic can solve obstacles. Magic becomes a tool the characters use, like a sword. They still have to use their wits and cunning, however, so in the end it's still the character overcoming the plot. As with Sci-Fi, if you define magic, giving it detail means the magic itself can become demystified. It still provides plot twists, world building, and points of conflict, but it means that magic is not solving the issues faced by the characters. The characters are using their wits and discovering how to use the tool of magic to overcome the obstacles of the plot.

Exercise Two

Based on these examples, let's see if you can nail down the level of magic for some popular fantasy series. Try to guess where they fall among these three areas (where I place them are at the end of this worksheet).

The Kingkiller Chronicle	_____
The Dresden Files	_____
The Wheel of Time	_____
The Stormlight Archive	_____

Thinking Point Three – Abilities

One thing that helps me wrap my head around magic is to figure out how I want magic to affect the plot.

From there, I can begin to create what magic can do.

Thinking Point Four – Limitations

To make magic work within most plots, and to ensure said magic does not become overpowering, 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. This Uncertainty Principle will force your characters (and you, by extension) to work to overcome obstacles, build tension, keep the readers off balance and build depth into your characters, which ensures they are not two-dimensional.

Exercise Three

Let's look at all of the series mentioned in thinking point two. For the ones you've read, list at least one limitation of the magic. I've also put a couple lines below them for you to add in more books if you haven't gotten to those series yet:

- The Kingkiller Chronicle _____
- The Dresden Files _____
- The Wheel of Time _____
- The Stormlight Archive _____
- The Lord of the Rings _____
- Mistborn _____
- The Harry Potter Series _____

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.

This Equalizing Principle allows 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.

Exercise Four

Let’s look at all of the series mentioned in thinking point two. For the ones you’ve read, list at least one limitation of the magic. I’ve also put a couple lines below them for you to add in more books if you haven’t gotten to those series yet:

- The Kingkiller Chronicle _____
- The Dresden Files _____
- The Wheel of Time _____
- The Stormlight Archive _____
- The Lord of the Rings _____
- Mistborn _____
- The Harry Potter Series _____

Thinking Point Six – Costs

Adding a cost to your magic system can add a dimension that forces your characters to make difficult decisions. These decisions will have real, story-based consequences. These decisions can be used toward your Invisible Layer, helping your character’s transition and have an emotional impact for your reader. This Humanizing Principle 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.

Exercise Five

What were some plot based costs the characters of the following stories had to pay in order to use their magic?

- The Kingkiller Chronicle _____
- The Dresden Files _____
- The Wheel of Time _____
- The Stormlight Archive _____
- The Lord of the Rings _____
- Mistborn _____
- The Harry Potter Series _____

Thinking Point Seven – Make it Visual

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

Exercise Six

Go to town on the lines below, use your own story or one of the ones we've been using in this worksheet and describe an example of it working:

Thinking Point Eight – Deep is better than Wide

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 than trying to define every single aspect.

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...?

As a quick thinking exercise, let's think of an imaginary world where there are large pillars of flame that shoot out of the earth and into the air. Then let's say that one out of every thousand people can draw flame from—and even direct—these pillars. How does that affect the progression of their civilization?

Hunter gatherers have access to fire starters. Where does that take them once they become an agrarian society? What happens once their agrarian societies become fiefdoms?

Exercise Seven

In the space below, give some insight into how you think such magic would affect the progression of the imaginary world:

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

Medicine
Communication
Travel
Food Production / Storage
Protection

Exercise Eight

Give me some answers! How do the fire people affect these aspects of their society? Remember, think outside the box!

Thinking Point Ten – 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 understand it at a deeper level, as well as give you ideas on how to better use it during your story.

Exercise Nine

Where did the fire pillars and fire users in our imaginary world come from?

Thinking Point Eleven – Never Break Your Own Rules

The easiest way to lose your reader’s trust is to break the rules of magic you have created. You can do it, but you must have an iron-clad reason for doing so that is story motivated.

Jane Yolen wrote in *Writing Books for Children* (1983): “The world a writer creates may have as its laws that the inhabitants are nothing but a pack of cards, that animals converse intelligently while messing about in boats, or that a magic ring can make its bearer invisible at the long, slow cost of his soul. But once these laws are set down, the writer cannot, on a whim, set them aside. They must work in the fantasy world as surely as gravity works in ours.”

Before I forget, here are my answers for Thinking Point Two. If you disagree, yell at me on Twitter or Facebook. I love a good nerd discussion.

The Kingkiller Chronicle	Ambiguous
The Dresden Files	Ambiguous
The Wheel of Time	Defined
The Stormlight Archive	Defined

All right, that’s a wrap for this Making Magic Believable worksheet. Have any questions? Don’t forget to attend my online subscriber-only Q&A session on the 20th of every month where you get access to me, Or pick up my book *Dynamic Story Creation* to have it on your shelf.

Until next time,
Drake