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CONSTRUCTING A STORYWORLD THROUGH TRADING CARDS

The Case of *Magic: The Gathering*

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ABSTRACT

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Trading cards are an under-researched multimodal medium of storytelling. This thesis introduces the trading card medium and applies cognitive narratological starting points to inspect trading cards as a medium comparable to other narrative media such as books and comics. The thesis defines ways in which cards from the trading card game *Magic: The Gathering* (1993–) work to construct a storyworld through depictions of characters and setting and guide the reader to construct a mental model of the storyworld through them. The primary material consists of a selection of *Magic: The Gathering* trading cards from the period 2021–2024, which are analysed by dissecting the functions of the various individual card elements, such as the illustration and rules text. The theoretical material consists of narratological theory as established by scholars such as David Herman, Marie-Laure Ryan, Fotis Jannidis and Ralf Schneider.

The thesis argues that individual visual and textual card elements (name, illustration, types, rules text et cetera) serve various different functions in guiding the reader and their mental model construction. However, engagement with multiple elements and often multiple thematically interrelated cards is regularly necessitated in order to form coherence that guides the formation of the mental model. Through interpretation of semiotic cues from multiple cards the reader can then make conclusions and form a coherent mental model. Reader interpretation is, however, partly based on a working understanding of the underlying game and its mechanics.

The findings indicate that the individual card elements utilise showing and telling to guide the reader to form connections between each other and between separate cards. The reader can then combine the pieces created by these connections into coherent wholes—the mental models of the storyworld, its setting(s) and its inhabitants, the characters. In the context that is constructed by the card name and that is further defined, narrowed and categorised by the card types, the reader can interpret semiotic cues from the illustration as well as the flavour and rules texts to assign features to characters, their setting and the relations they have among each other.

Keywords: *Magic: The Gathering*, trading card, storyworld, character, setting, narratology.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Miro T. Ankerman: Constructing a Storyworld Through Trading Cards: The Case of *Magic: The Gathering*
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Keräilykortit ovat verrattain vähän tutkittu multimodaalinen tarinankerronnan väline. Tämä tutkielma esittelee mitä keräilykortit ovat ja soveltaa kognitiivisen narratologian lähtökohtia tarkastellakseen niitä kirjoihin ja sarjakuviin verrattavana välineenä. Tutkielma selvittää erityisesti tapoja, joilla keräilykorttipeli *Magic: The Gatheringin* (1993–) kortit rakentavat henkilöhahmojen ja tapahtumapaikkojen esittämisen kautta tarinamaailmaansa, ja miten nämä ohjaavat lukijaa muodostamaan tarinamaailmasta ns. mentaalisen mallin. Tutkielman primäärimateriaali koostuu valikoiduista *Magic: The Gathering* -keräilykorteista ajalta 2021–2024. Näiden analyysi perustuu yksittäisten korttielementtien – kuten kuvan ja sääntötekstin – tehtävien tarkasteluun. Tutkielman teoreettinen tausta puolestaan rakentuu narratologiselle teoriapohjalle, joka perustuu muun muassa tutkijoiden David Herman, Marie-Laure Ryan, Fotis Jannidis ja Ralf Schneider työlle.

Tutkielma esittää, että pelikorttien yksittäiset visuaaliset ja tekstuaaliset elementit (mm. nimi, kuvitus, tyypit ja sääntöteksti) vaikuttavat siihen, millaisen mentaalisen mallin lukija muodostaa pelin tapahtumapaikasta ja henkilöhahmoista. Usein on kuitenkin tarpeen tarkastella useita erinäisiä korttielementtejä ja useita temaattisesti yhtenäisiä kortteja, jotta rakentuva koherenssi myös osaltaan ohjaa mentaalisen mallin rakentumista. Lukija voi tehdä johtopäätöksiä tulkitsemalla semioottisia merkkejä erinäisistä korteista ja muodostaa niiden avulla kokonaisen mentaalisen mallin. Tulkinnat kuitenkin nojaavat jonkin verran korttien taustalla olevan pelin ja sen mekaniikkojen tuntemukseen.

Tulokset osoittavat, että yksittäiset korttielementit hyödyntävät näyttämisen ja kertomisen keinoja ohjatakseen lukijaa muodostamaan yhteyksiä toistensa ja erillisten korttien välille. Lukija voi sitten yhdistää näiden yhteyksien rakentamia paloja kokonaisuuksiksi, eli mentaalisiksi malleiksi tarinamaailmasta, sekä sen tapahtumapaikoista ja henkilöhahmoista. Lukija voi keskeisesti tulkita semioottisia merkkejä kortin kuvituksesta, sekä sääntö- ja tarinateksteistä ja asettaa nämä tulkinnat kortin nimen luomaan ja kortin tyyppien rajaamaan kontekstiin, siten kirjaten piirteitä henkilöhahmoille, tapahtumapaikoille ja näiden välisille suhteille.

Avainsanat: *Magic: The Gathering*, keräilykortti, tarinamaailma, henkilöhahmo, tapahtumapaikka, narratologia.

USE OF AI IN THESIS

I have utilised AI tools in my thesis:

- ☒ No
- ☐ Yes

I acknowledge that I am fully responsible for the entire content of my thesis, including the parts generated by AI, and accept accountability for any violations of ethical standards in publications.

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1. Introduction

Storytelling takes place through various media, and whilst books and comics are well-established in their storytelling ways, also other media can express stories. In the modern day the storytelling potential of games (video games and otherwise) has piqued academic interest. This is a logical trend, given the rising prominence of gaming in contemporary culture. However, one such gaming medium that has received only limited scholarly attention from the perspective of storytelling is the trading card, despite the wide popularity of trading card games in today's culture. Though they have been discussed through various disciplines—mathematics, economics, game studies, et cetera—approaching them as storytelling medium is particularly underrepresented.

One such trading card game is *Magic: The Gathering* (1993–), designed by Richard Garfield and published by the American-based Wizards of the Coast. Though cards in various forms have existed throughout history—the tarot cards, the 52-card deck, sports cards, et cetera—*Magic* is generally regarded as the first to combine the elements of collecting and strategic gameplay, and is thus credited as founding the trading card game genre (Crutcher). Though many trading card games that were released after *Magic*'s initial success are based on already-established (and commercially successful) franchises and their storyworlds, *Magic* is not founded on such an externally established world; instead, it makes use of a storyworld it itself works to define—The Multiverse (Cuvelier 4; Ohm 274). The *Magic* Multiverse, as the name implies, is a collective multiverse of numerous parallel universes; these are referred to as planes.[1] A core premise of the Multiverse has been that interplanar travel is only possible to select few individuals who possess what is known as the spark; those with the spark are known as *planeswalkers*. The Multiverse forms the coherent, overarching theme showcased on the cards. Since its 1993 debut the *Magic* franchise has extended beyond the card game into a larger transmedia franchise, incorporating other media (novels, video games, comics, a website,

[1] Some of the better-known planes include, for example, Ravnica, Innistrad, Dominaria and Zendikar.

et cetera) to further define the original universe—the storyworld; the card game, however, remains at the forefront of both the commercial focus and consumer engagement.

This thesis analyses the *Magic: The Gathering* trading card game to define and explore how trading cards function as a medium of storytelling, specifically in terms of how the cards construct the game's storyworld and support the reader in constructing a mental image of it;[2] what the reader can gather about the storyworld through engagement with the characters and spaces portrayed through the cards. This can be approached in two ways that, whilst related, differ enough to require separate focus. One could adopt an approach more in line with previous broader tabletop game narratology (see, for example, Arnaudo), where the research focus lies on the story that unfolds through player involvement and interaction; this would be a valid focus, and has been devoted some previous research already (see Travis). However, this thesis inspects the trading card as a platform comparable to other narrative media (such as the book and comic) to explore how the original storyworld of *Magic* is realised through it, independent of the act of gaming. In terms of larger research objectives, the study brings more light to an under-researched side of contemporary culture, and aids in establishing trading cards as a more recognised medium for storytelling. In doing so, it aims to inspire and facilitate further and broader future research into this avenue.

Though the approach I adopt here is not one strictly of game studies, it is still a fact that *Magic* is first and foremost a game and the cards in turn game pieces; as such some basic terminology from game studies is necessary. First, the term ludology is central: it is "the study of game structure (or gameplay)" and it is separate from the study of narrative, narratology (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 337). Thus, when I write of something as ludic or ludological, I mean something in regards to the underlying game structure or gameplay, as opposed to narrative/story relevance. Second, the concept of game

[2] For the sake of clarity, I write here of players when referring to those engaging with the game, and of readers when referring to those engaging with the story(world), though there is undoubtedly overlap between the two. It should also be noted that not every individual engaging with trading cards is necessarily a player, and other motivations, financial and otherwise, also play a role.

mechanics, meaning the events and actions allowed by game design, "i.e. what the player can do" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 337), is particularly relevant to some aspects of my analysis.

In this thesis, the analysis of the storyworld of *Magic: The Gathering* is primarily concerned with two basic story elements: characters and setting—specifically the realm of Skemfar in the plane of Kaldheim and its inhabitants. These elements that together form a crucial part of the storyworld are approached from starting points of cognitive narratology, as established by scholars such as David Herman, Marie-Laure Ryan, Fotis Jannidis and Ralf Schneider. The primary material consists of a selection of *Magic: The Gathering* trading cards from the period 2021–2024 and is motivated by reoccurring characters and locales. The observations made here could be applied to virtually any similar selection of cards made from any point of the game's history. The primary material is accessed using the third-party *Magic* card search engine *Scryfall* as opposed to the official Wizards of the Coast *Gatherer* site, as the latter does not allow accessing specific versions of a card. The analysis of the two story elements highlights affordances of the trading card medium. Exploration of the ways the medium is utilised to define characters and setting would also be highly applicable to researching other elements (such as plot and events), as the cards inevitably use the same sets of tools to define anything they are chosen to depict. In addition, though the focus here is specifically on *Magic*, similar observations could likely also be made with other trading card games that incorporate a storyworld in their design.

After an overview of the background and the theoretical starting points in Chapters 2.1 and 2.2 respectively, the storyworld as constructed by the trading cards is analysed through groupings based on card elements (see fig. 1) in Chapters 3.1–3.4.

2. Trading cards and theoretical starting points

In Chapter 2.1 I broadly introduce the trading card game and medium and the *Magic: The Gathering* trading card game. This is necessary as they are relatively unknown in the academic community—as

is suggested by limited previous research—and are not as well-established in common knowledge as more "conventional" media such as the novel. In Chapter 2.2 I discuss the theoretical starting points by introducing key concepts and terms that are then used in the analysis in Chapter 3. Likewise, I also further showcase the working definitions of character and setting placed in the framework used here.

2.1. *Magic: The Gathering* and the trading card game

As outlined above, trading card games (TCGs; also collectible card games CCGs) are card games that combine strategic elements of deckbuilding with the elements of collecting. *Magic* is generally credited to be the first game to do this, and thus to begin this popular genre that has given rise to numerous successors that make use of the design and mechanics it first introduced (Crutcher; Ohm 283). Though originally associated with tabletop gaming, the TCG genre has since evolved to include also digital gaming through purely digital titles such as *Hearthstone* and *Gwent*, and digital adaptation of analogue games such as *Magic: The Gathering Arena* and *Yu-Gi-Oh Master Duel*.

An understanding of some aspects of the underlying game of *Magic* and its distribution are fundamental for understanding the upcoming analysis. Though in many cases a plethora of exceptions could also be listed, these are only explained to the depth required for someone unfamiliar with the game to engage with the thesis.

The game pieces (= cards) are acquired through randomised *booster pack* products, through trading with other players, or through third parties. A booster pack, depending on its specific variant, would generally contain a randomised assortment of a dozen or so cards, whereas through the secondary market players may purchase specific individual cards—colloquially called *singles*—which have significant price variation, ranging from some cents to thousands of euros. These booster products (and the singles therein) are linked to *expansion sets* which are comprised of a collection of cards (generally) connected through common theme(s), setting(s) and/or story. From a narrative point of view, these sets introduce new characters and settings, but also make use of ones established by

previous sets, simultaneously moving the *Magic* story forward and characterising it as an ongoing narrative. From a ludic perspective, these sets also introduce new and returning game mechanics.

From the cards, players will construct *decks* (of usually 60 or 100 cards, depending on format), which may be upgraded and changed as new cards are acquired. This process is called deckbuilding. The players then use these decks to play against each other in some of the *formats* (e.g. standard and commander) that make up the game of *Magic*. In its core this game is a one of resource management, where the goal is to reduce one's opponent's life total to zero and win the game.[3] A resource called *mana* is used to pay for a pre-determined *mana cost*, which is a pre-requisite for playing (*casting*) each card. This mana is primarily gained from the card type called *land*. Mana exists in five colours: white, blue, black, red and green, and in colourless, and is collectively referred to as *the colour wheel*. In addition to these there is also the concept of *generic mana*. Generic mana cost may be paid using mana of any colour, whereas the five coloured (and colourless) may only be paid using mana of that specific type.

It should also be noted that the *Magic* cards exist in multiple types, as indicated by the card element *type*. The main types are *creature, instant, sorcery, enchantment, planeswalker, artifact, battle* and *land*. Of these, creature, enchantment, planeswalker, artifact and land are considered *permanent cards*—over the course of the game, they stay in play after they have been played, as opposed to *non-permanent cards*, instants and sorceries, which are single-use and are no longer in play after resolving their effect. These are examined more in-depth in Chapter 3.2.

Some of the aspects above, whilst not necessarily exactly in the same way how they appear in *Magic* specifically, can in various forms also be identified in other TCGs. Particularly the booster pack distribution system is characteristic of trading cards as a whole, as is the use of some kind of resource in gameplay (mana in *Hearthstone*, energy in *Pokémon*, et cetera). Likewise, trading cards

[3] This is an oversimplification that fails to account for a variety of diverging strategies, but is the "traditional" direction a game of *Magic* would presumably take.

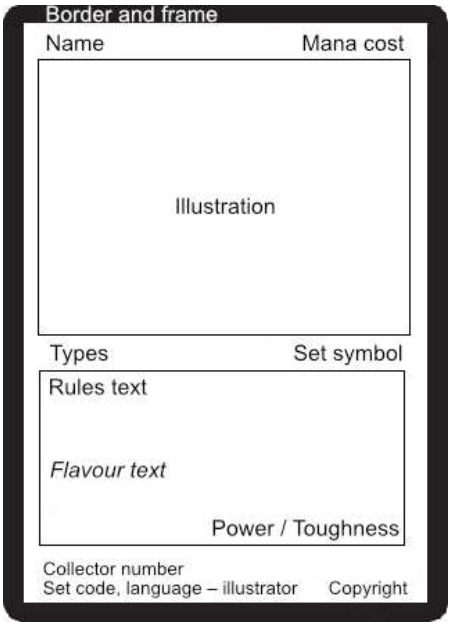

Figure 1: The elements of a Magic card. Adapted from Cuvelier.

Figure 2: "Jaspera Sentinel" KHM/178

are an intrinsically multimodal medium. Multimodality is defined as "the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product" where the semiotic modes may reinforce or complement each other, or exist in a hierarchy (Kress and Van Leeuwen 20). The trading card medium makes use of two semiotic modes, text and image, which are here addressed as the channels of textual and visual (adapted from the typology of Ryan, "Introduction" 21). The elements of the *Magic* card (see fig. 1 and 2) align with these two channels: the elements that are strictly visual include the border, frame, (set symbol) and most predominantly the illustration, whereas the rest, with the exception of mana cost, are strictly textual. Mana cost is the only outlier, as it utilises both channels.

The card elements could also be roughly divided in terms of their ludological versus narratological relevance: as individual elements, the illustration and flavour text hold little strictly ludic purpose (aside from contributing to recognisability, as noted by Cuvelier), whereas they are integral to the narrative whole. However, the opposite does not hold as true: no element is strictly void of narrative relevance, and as such categorising them through this is not particularly useful. Indeed, the elements analysed in the thesis include everything besides the technical information elements at the bottom of the card (presented in fig. 1 in a smaller font size), which inherently carry no narrative or ludic value and should not be viewed as part of the elements proper (instead, they are

comparable to the publisher information presented in books). The specific elements are introduced in more detail in the part of the analysis that pertains to them.

Lastly, before moving to the theoretical approach adopted in the analysis section, it should be noted that whilst figure 1 attributes names to the card elements and places them in the corresponding locations on the card face, not every *Magic* card is identical. This is particularly true in today's *Magic* where prominence of variance is ever-growing, being also visible in the primary material utilised in this thesis. Whereas some elements are more or less universal—such as the card name and technical information—not every *Magic* card includes all of the elements. A *Magic* card is inherently forced to place all of its elements onto a limited 63x88mm surface area (though some cards do additionally utilise the back side of the card, doubling the allocated space); as a result, as Seth Glickman notes, the card face is a kind of battlefield of elements (2), and emphasising one of the card elements in the design often happens to the detriment of another. The included elements partially correspond with card type, but additional variation is introduced by special card treatments; for example, some cards exist in a full art variant where the border and frame are entirely replaced by extension of the illustration. Thus, additional emphasis of the illustration takes place to the detriment of the border and frame. Nevertheless, it is useful to have a graphic showing the basis of possible elements, and even deviations from this exact structure can be discussed using the terms introduced there.

2.2. Character, setting and storyworld as mental models

As I outlined in the introduction, the analysis below pertains to characters and setting. I approach them from the broad perspective of the *storyworld* and incorporate theory primarily from a cognitive narratological starting point. As a term, storyworld has multiple definitions, and variance exists between theoretical approaches. Here I use the term in alignment with narratology: it is a "world evoked implicitly as well as explicitly by a narrative" regardless of the form that narrative takes (Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* 106). The storyworld can be approached as a mentally configured model of the world where the story takes place, one that evolves as the reader interprets

semiotic cues from the material at hand (Ryan, "Story/Worlds/Media" 34–35). David Herman argues that engaging with stories inherently "entails mapping . . . cues onto . . . dimensions of mentally configured worlds" (*Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind* 105). Whereas the concept of the storyworld inherently applies to all narratives and both fiction and non-fiction stories (Ryan, "Story/Worlds/Media" 35), I highlight specifically how the elements of the trading card face invoke it and contribute to the construction of the mental model.

According to Marie-Laure Ryan, the content of storyworlds is the sum of many components, and of all these two in particular stand out here: existents and setting ("Story/Worlds/Media" 36). Together these two components consist one of the constituents forming the mental image of a story (Ryan, "Narration in Various Media" 476). Existents are the characters and objects of the story—the things that exist in the storyworld—whereas the setting is the space(s) where they are located ("Story/Worlds/Media" 36). In this thesis, I approach characters and setting in conjunction with one another; characters inherently work to define their setting in various ways, and the setting also helps to understand the characters and their motivations by grounding them to their surroundings.

As a whole, setting generally refers to the "spatiotemporal circumstances" of the story (Prince 107), or the "socio-historico-geographical environment in which the action takes place" (Ryan, "Space" 798). In this thesis I specifically lean toward its spatial aspects, the space(s) of the storyworld, but the temporal dimension cannot be entirely ignored. Moreover, though Ryan notes that there are many different approaches to space, I approach it primarily as a container of existents and location of events, as the "environment in which characters live and move" ("Space" 797). In a story the reader is usually shown individual locations but these tend to imply a larger world, and "the story space [is] completed by the reader's imagination" (Ryan, "Space" 797–98); thus, these individual spaces are parts of the larger storyworld. Though how these spaces are shown and constructed through the trading cards is primarily inspected in the analysis section, it might be generally noted that spaces are showcased through individual cards (e.g. cards that specifically depict locations of some kind), or

non-dominant parts of the illustration (e.g. as a background for the existents), and details about them might be inferred from cards depicting others things (such as characters).

Characters, in turn, are defined as the (often human or human-like) figures or participants in a storyworld (Jannidis 30); the "persons" that can be "inferred to populate the storyworld" (Herman, *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind* 194). Fotis Jannidis claims that "[f]or most readers, characters are one of the most important aspects of a narrative" (31); they are (generally) the vessels moving the story forward. Specific individual characters in a story are defined through the process of characterisation, where they are ascribed properties either directly by assigning them traits, or indirectly by inferring things from world and character knowledge (Jannidis 31; Prince 24). These properties may be psychological, physiological, social or locative (Jannidis 37). The reader's character knowledge includes knowledge on character models and types, as well as encyclopedic knowledge on everyday things and genre tropes (Jannidis 30). Jannidis notes that approaching characters usually emphasises some kind of reliance on external knowledge (30), and in understanding them readers often resort to knowledge on real people (32). In *Magic* characters are dominantly shown through the creature and planeswalker card types, but details about them might also be inferred from elsewhere, for example, the illustration of a card of some other type representing the character's likeness, or a card's flavour text quoting something the character has said (more on these in Chapters 3.2 and 3.3).

Aligning with the approach to the general storyworld outlined above, also characters can be approached as mental models created by the reader (Schneider qtd. in Jannidis 34). As explained by Ralf Schneider, a reader combines their previous social and literary knowledge with "all direct or indirect sources of characterizing information" absorbed from the text at hand, connecting those in constructing mental models of situations, time, spaces and characters (607; 611). Building upon previous literary information, mental model construction is influenced by intertextuality and literary tropes, presuming the reader's ability to recognise them. Provided a basic understanding of literary

genres, a reader might expect certain characters from certain types of texts (Schneider 613); for example, *Magic* aligns with many characteristics associated with the (high-)fantasy genre (though it does occasionally overlap with other genres), and someone engaging with it might expect content that reflects that. The models may also build upon social factors such as assumptions of human behaviour and social stereotypes (Schneider 612), which may be time and culture specific (Jannidis 34). Unless made to believe otherwise, readers have a tendency to assume qualities of the storyworld correspond to the real world (Ryan qtd. in Jannidis 38). Schneider notes that upon establishing a mental model it is then "continually updated to incorporate the latest information" throughout the reading process (617). The reader often only receives fragments of information and is prompted to fill the gaps based on appropriate knowledge (Jannidis 35).

Mental model construction takes place in part through *categorisation*. A text might directly invoke categorisation through explicit reference to some social category, such as a profession or social role (such as 'the teacher')—but this could also take place indirectly, where a reader interprets semiotic cues as aligning to such categories or social stereotypes (Schneider 619). Where the reader applies this categorisation through literary tropes and stock characters (such as 'the mentor'), literary categorisation takes place—this also takes place through explicit intertextual reference, where something from an external text is referenced and this then helps to define that in the text at hand (Schneider 619–20). It should be noted that while Schneider writes of mental models specifically in the context of literary characters, much of the above can also be adapted to analysing the setting (and other elements).

The trading card, as I noted in Chapter 2.1, incorporates the visual in its design. As such when the medium incorporates visual aspects in its design, it may itself directly show how something looks like instead of only relying on the reader's imagination. "[A]n affordance of images is the capacity to describe visual experience in visual and spatial detail" (Mikkonen 19–20), which is in contrast to solely text-based narratives, which have to "convey information about the storyworld . . . by purely

verbal means" (Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* 107). Therefore, the reader is usually given the visual likeness of the character or locale, and must only ascribe other features, such as personality, to the mental model, though these could also somewhat rely on or be reinforced by the visual representation provided by the medium.

3. The card elements constructing the storyworld

In Chapters 3.1–3.4 I discuss the individual card elements and their functions in constructing the storyworld. I analyse the chosen primary material and what the individual card elements contribute to the mental model of the storyworld in their context, resulting in an understanding of the realm of Skemfar in Kaldheim and its inhabitants a reader might construct. It should be noted that the 2021 set *Kaldheim* that much of the primary material is derived from and that first introduced the setting of Skemfar has taken heavy inspiration from Norse mythology, and this is readily apparent from promotional material and product packaging. A reader would likely be aware of this before otherwise engaging with the cards.

3.1. Border, frame and illustration: sequencing and showing

The visual forms a major part of the trading card face and through this the medium has some similarities with the comic medium. Randy Duncan and Matthew Smith assign a number of characteristics to the formal constraints of the comic book medium, and a number of these are relevant to the trading card: "space limitations", images as "selected moments", and, what I wish to particularly highlight, "limited control of the reader" (119). What they mean is that a reader might choose to view the panels and pages in any order, and the duration of viewing may vary. A lack of control over the reader is present with the trading cards due to them being individual objects rather than panels meticulously placed over a page, and their distribution model primarily through randomised boosters adds to this. Unlike with comics, however, a reader might unintentionally miss

crucial information purely by the chance of them not having received the cards depicting them; thus, forming a coherent model becomes more difficult.

One might also interpret the individual trading card as a panel not unlike those in comic books, and in turn interpret the elements of frame and border as akin to the frames of the comic panels and the gutter between them. The frame contains the depicted thing, and the border functions as the divider between this "scene" and others. In comics temporal sequencing is achieved through a series of panels, and the reader is invited to construct the connections between them; a sequence of panels might depict a character and their change through time, or the same moment from different angles (Mikkonen 38). The gutter, the empty space between the comic panels, signifies all the things that take place between the images in the sequence (McCloud qtd. in Mikkonen 38), partially to temporal effect (Mikkonen 38–39). The function of the border in trading card is similar, though inherently much more is left for the reader to fill in. Interpretation of the things taking place in the space signified by the border, including the temporal relations between individual cards, is not as clear-cut and easy to distinguish as with comic books, partially due to them indeed being individual objects. Trading cards rarely depict moments that are as seamlessly connected as those in comic books, and much more of their connections are left for the reader to construct. Similar sequences of "panels" can, however, be achieved through interpretation of semiotic cues on cards with related themes; these themes are partially clarified by the set structure generally suggesting for the reader that there is some connection between the cards within the set, thus reducing how much the reader is required to construct in terms of these connections.

Regarding temporal sequencing I will briefly mention the set symbol and the underlying set structure it signifies. One might assume that a set of cards released after another has moved the *Magic* story forward, and so references the later set makes to characters and setting introduced in an earlier set might be assumed to be set later in the storyworld's chronological timeframe. For example, the set *Kaldheim* [KHM] released in 2021 is chronologically set before the set *March of the Machine:*

The Aftermath [MAT] released in 2023, therefore references to the plane of Kaldheim made in MAT are assumed to be set later than those in KHM. The set structure can be viewed as a basic tool of temporal sequencing for the cards, though is one that requires previous familiarity in order to be effective—particularly as some sets are outside the strict timeline of the *Magic* story despite making references to it, and others (such as the *Universes Beyond* product line) are completely detached. However, there is ultimately a rough timeframe even within a single set of cards, and it can be assumed that not all of the cards in a set depict simultaneous moments, the reader is therefore left to construct the internal temporal relations within a set of cards.[4]

Whereas the border and frame guide the reader by containing the other elements of the card face, the illustration then works to contextualise the card by showing what the card depicts. The illustration is the dominant element on the *Magic* card face; it generally takes up about half of the space—though extended art and full art variants introduce variation—and is the most detailed and eye-catching part on it. It is something of a truism to state that images depict things, and that from those depictions a reader might interpret a number of things, some more obvious than others. By analysing the card illustrations, both the dominant elements and the nondominant background elements, the reader may map details about the setting and its inhabitants onto their mental model.

The card "Skemfar Elderhall" (see fig. 3) depicts in its illustration a table surrounded by chairs which all appear wooden and decorated with carvings. Around these pieces of furniture one can identify a timber frame forming a canopy and the posts that support it, as well as natural trees forming the walls around this structure and rays of natural light shining through the canopy, particularly due to a lack of an actual roof. Some conclusions about the setting can be made from these aspects of the illustration. The integration of natural elements into the architectural whole, or the positioning of the architectural elements around the natural so as not to disrupt them, showcases a degree of sanctity or respect placed on the natural world in the culture of Skemfar. This is also suggested by the seemingly

[4] The perception of time in trading cards as such falls outside the scope of this thesis and could benefit from dedicated research.

Figure 3: "Skemfar Elderhall" KHM/268

Figure 4: "Harald, King of Skemfar" KHM/212

partially uncontained space inside the structure, as the lack of a roof and solid walls allows sunlight, wind and other natural phenomenon to freely penetrate the space. However, the utilisation of the obviously treated wood elements in the architectural style does suggest that this sanctity is not absolute, and that natural resources can be harvested and utilised. Based on this illustration alone is difficult to deduce how the rest of the culture's architecture aligns with these features, but it does build a foundation for the reader to construct their model of Skemfar society.

One can also deduce a cultural permission to utilise natural resources through the fashion of the inhabitants of Skemfar. In the illustrations of "Harald, King of Skemfar" (see fig. 4), "Tyvar Kell" (see fig. 5) and "Lathril, Blade of the Elves" (see fig. 6) the characters are clearly depicted as wearing clothing and armour (though in Tyvar and Harald's case this clothing leaves parts of the upper body exposed), and indeed such items require resources of natural origin to prepare. This is contrasted by the natural elements in the illustrations' backgrounds, surrounding these "unnatural" objects with a natural environment, in doing so showcasing that nature is important to the culture and that it can coexist with a degree of exploitation. Alike to the furniture in "Skemfar Elderhall", the clothing is also rather ornate, evidently also serving other purposes beyond the utilitarian, thus suggesting cultural value placed on aesthetics. Externally these features of the illustration also align with the

Figure 5: "Tyvar Kell" KHM/198

Figure 6: "Lathril, Blade of the Elves" KHC/1

visual aesthetics perceived in other previous fantasy storytelling, potentially allowing the reader to then incorporate assumptions based on these to their mental model of Skemfar and its inhabitants.

It is unclear whether the Skemfar sanctity of nature is only concerned with trees, generally with plant-based life, or if that sanctity also extends to animals. In line with this one also wonders how the average Skemfar diet might be, and what the primary sources of nourishment are to the inhabitants in the constraints of their cultural norms. Featuring weapons and armour in the illustrations of Lathril and Tyvar Kell suggest that the culture does not partake in pacifism, even being a warrior culture as a whole, and particularly the presence of bows in the illustration of "Jaspera Sentinel" (see fig. 2) could potentially imply the presence of hunting in their culture as bows are well suited for such, but much is ultimately left to the reader's imagination.

Inherently the illustration also shows how individual characters look. For example, from inspecting the illustration of "Tyvar Kell" one can deduce physiological properties of the character. The character of Tyvar is physically able, as suggested by the well-defined muscular structure, as well as a warrior of some kind, as suggested by his armour and the blade he is shown with. His pointy ears also align with physiological features traditionally associated with elves in fantasy, which would lead a reader to recognise them as an elf, particularly when contrasting these features with other cards like

“Harald, King of Skemfar” or “Jaspera Sentinel” also depicting similar physical features, though perhaps better contextualised than in “Tyvar Kell” alone.

In summary, the frame contains the card whole and the border implies the time, distance and events taking place between individual cards, acting as a tool of sequencing (temporal or otherwise). Centrally, the visual channel utilised by the card illustration shows how characters and their surroundings look. The visual allows the construction of a solid base for the reader’s mental model and facilitates mapping further details from elsewhere to reaffirm and refine it.

3.2. Name, types and mana cost: contextualisation and categorisation

The card name and types contextualise the card by naming what it depicts or represents. “Skemfar Elderhall” assigns a name to the location depicted in the card, and “Tyvar Kell” names the character it represents. The trading card medium also invokes and utilises categorisation, and this takes place in multiple ways through these same elements as well as the mana cost. The trading card makes some more direct attempts at categorisation than with such media as the novel, though they do also pose similarities. Some of this categorisation is achieved already with the card name. In “Harald, King of Skemfar” the latter part defines Harald’s social role as a royal, which might invoke specific images in the reader based on their understanding of the genre at hand and what king characters usually entail in that. Their royal role is also placed in a specific locale in the storyworld: Skemfar. Somewhat similarly, in “Lathril, Blade of the Elves”, the latter part of the name, interpreted as an accolade assigned to Lathril, showcases a prominent and respected role in their society, though does not as directly denote categorisation by a social role. By contrast, “Tyvar Kell” makes no such direct attempt at all, as the card name only reflects the character’s full name, without any further categories assigned therein. Here one can, however, draw a separation between card name and character name, as the two are separate, even if one usually partially reflects the other in order to ensure appropriate contextualisation.

A reader might make certain interpretations from the names of characters and locations by applying, into the construction of their mental model, external information based on the aforementioned *Kaldheim* set. The names of the characters Tyvar and Harald in particular, as well as the name of the setting they inhabit, Skemfar, fit into a Nordic-like context for the reader to place them in. The creation of this image is guided by the general theme of Norse mythology apparent on *Kaldheim* as a whole. This might lead to a reader incorporating knowledge on the Vikings and Norse gods onto their mental model, insofar as it is possible. The Vikings' warrior culture, or at least its portrayal in popular culture, might be the most relevant of such knowledge in the Skemfar context. A reader exceedingly familiar with concepts of Norse mythology might then additionally draw a parallel between *Magic*'s Skemfar and the Norse land of the elves Álfheimr and potentially see further connections therein. However, such a connection would likely not be expected from the vast majority of readers, as it presupposes previous knowledge that goes beyond common knowledge.

As the card name has contextualised the card as a whole, the card element *type* (*card type*, *supertype* and *subtype*) works towards explicit categorisation, in that it literally assigns some categories to the thing the card represents. The card type sets the stage by denoting what the represented thing is in a broader sense. For example, the card type *creature* denotes a being that is living in some manner, whereas *artifact* suggests merely an object or construct of some kind, and *land* a location. *Magic* does also regularly combine some of these types to create other ones; particularly the artifact type is often combined with the creature type to create the concept of artifact creature, an object or construct that has somehow come to be living or animate. In *Magic* supertypes are used sparingly, the most notable of them being the legendary supertype which denotes renown and prestige associated with the depicted thing. By contrast, the subtypes of a card are numerous and common; they further narrow down the category introduced by the card type. For example, in "Harald, King of Skemfar", the creature type is further narrowed with the subtypes elf and warrior. Where the card type creature has defined Harald as something living, the subtype elf further defines

what kind of a creature they are, and then the subtype warrior denotes their social role or profession. The same also happens in "Lathril, Blade of the Elves", though the social role is defined by a different subtype: noble. This kind of categorisation, however, only rarely extends beyond the creature supertype, as other card types do not as often make use of it or their use of it is more limited. In the case of the planeswalker card type, representing—also living—individuals who can travel between the planes of the Multiverse, the subtypes, rather than reflecting categories of the depicted thing, instead only categorise the card as representing the character. With "Tyvar Kell", the subtype "Tyvar" does little to further categorise the character and instead merely reinforces it as being specifically Tyvar. In a more ludic sense, the subtype does work to further narrow the planeswalker supertype, but does not tell the reader more in the narrative sense. It would, however, clear up any potential confusion the reader might have about the character being Tyvar in cases where the card name was somehow ambiguous, though this is purely a hypothetical.

With these types, contextualised by the character's name, the reader potentially has a very broad basis for defining what or who the character is; a reader might assign Harald and Lathril traits based on their previous knowledge on what elves are in real-world mythology or other fantasy storytelling (long lifespan, sophisticated demeanour, respect of the natural world, et cetera) to further refine their mental model. Likewise, the denoting of social role evokes images of whatever those roles resemble in the real world or in storytelling; Harald's kingship and Lathril's nobility place them in powerful positions in their culture's hierarchy in *Magic*'s storyworld. Their positions also characterise the setting where they exist, Skemfar, as a monarchic realm of some kind. Also, both Harald's warriorship and Lathril's accolade title further showcases a warrior culture where high-ranking individuals of the social hierarchy are expected to fight, or indeed their high ranking is the result of such contributions.

Explicit categorisation is also achieved with the mana cost, and more specifically the coloured mana symbols that denote the card's colour. This way of categorisation would partially elude someone

not already engaged in the discourse of *Magic*. The colour wheel lays the groundwork for ludic patterns, where game mechanics roughly align with design philosophies that are specific to the individual colours. White (depicted by a sun symbol) is associated with protection and order, blue (a water droplet) with deceit and intellect, black (a skull) with death and decay, red (a flame) with fury and chaos, and green (a tree) with life and nature. The mana symbols do evoke images of the associated themes to a degree, particularly the skull symbol of black achieves this, but others, such as blue's water droplet, appear more abstract, and thus would not as clearly lend themselves to readers outside the discourse of *Magic*. While these colours guide the design in the ludic sense, they inherently also carry narrative significance, representing the same associations also in the context of the storyworld. Tyvar Kell, Lathril and Harald all incorporate the green colour of mana in their mana cost, signifying a connection to life and to nature and to each other; this interpretation is additionally reinforced by the depictions of living natural elements in their illustrations. Lathril and Harald also incorporate the black colour in their mana cost, and Tyvar in the text box, in turn showcasing a connection with death and decay. This mix of two colours links the death and decay of black mana and the life and nature of green mana, notably contrasting life with death but also further playing with what nature is in the larger sense: the interplay of life and death and the cycle of death and decay facilitating new life. As such the two colours reinforce each other to place further emphasis on the nature of green. Black's association with death might also be interpreted as the act of taking life, aligning with the warrior traditions of the culture and society these characters exist in that are suggested by the other elements.

The name, types and mana cost give the reader additional context for the things they interpreted from the visual features. Whereas the primary function of a card name might be considered to be the explicit contextualisation of the card and what it depicts, it can also work to further categorise the depicted thing or character by assigning them titles or equivalent information. The types are more explicit as a means of categorisation, literally assigning categories to the card and what it depicts. The

categories appear to reinforce interpretations facilitated by the card illustration, such as confirming a character being an elf in alignment with their physical features as represented in the card illustration. The colours of mana then—another way of categorisation—assign certain philosophies to the things and characters the cards depict. These can likewise reinforce certain interpretations made from the strictly visual elements, such as confirming an alignment with the natural world in the case of the elves of Skemfar.

3.3. Flavor text: description and the making of connections

The element of flavour text functions to many effects aiding the reader in forming coherence to their model. The element consists of a short, italicised text, and though it is a rather short snippet of text, generally being only one to three lines in length, it achieves a lot by connecting various cards together. Out of all the card elements the flavour text could be considered the rarest, as it does not appear in every card; as noted by Pierre Cuvelier, the flavour text "only exists when the rules text does not already occupy all the available space" (9). For example, "Harald, King of Skemfar" has omitted the element as its rules text already fills the space where it would be located. When it does exist, the text is generally written akin to a short piece of prose, consisting of quotes, descriptions or other notes, and from these the reader may interpret details about the storyworld.

The flavour text of "Jaspera Sentinel" in the above reads as follows:

> *The arrows of the elvish elite strike as true and deadly as the fangs of the Cosmos Serpent they revere.* ("Jaspera Sentinel" KHM/178)

From this flavour text, worded akin to a narrator's commentary, the reader can centrally interpret that the elves of Skemfar revere the Cosmos Serpent, potentially as a part of a more organised religion. From the existence of the card "Koma, Cosmos Serpent" (see fig. 7) one might deduce that this Cosmos Serpent is an actual being in the storyworld, particularly when viewing other elements of the

Figure 7: "Koma, Cosmos Serpent" KHM/221

Figure 8: "Fynn, the Fangbearer" MUL/26

card, namely its illustration and types. Both Koma's "realness" and its reverence are also reinforced by the flavour text on other cards:

> *"Great Serpent, hear my song! We wait, our faith unshaken, for your glorious return."* ("Koma's Faithful" KHM/102)
>
> *"One day, the great serpent will rejoin us on Skemfar, and those who've wronged us will taste of our venom."* ("Elderfang Disciple" KHM/93)

These flavour texts notably take the form of quotations, though as no other "source" is attributed, they can be assumed to originate from the characters the cards depict, which are both bearing the creature subtypes elf and cleric, categorising them as religious figureheads in Skemfar elvish society. These reinforce Koma's place in the elvish religious scene, though they also suggest that the being has somehow disappeared (from Skemfar). Koma's depiction as a large serpent, that is, as an animal and thus part of the natural world, plays into the elvish sanctity of the natural world suggested by other elements, simultaneously confirming that animals do, at least to a degree, belong under this sanctity.

One premise of contemporary *Magic* is a card's ability to have various printings with unique versions of the illustration and flavour text; as long as the elements of ludic importance remain the

same, they are considered to be versions of the same card. Where the elements of ludic importance are different, however, the card is not considered a variant but rather a new card altogether. Koma's ultimate fate is told through flavour text in two variants of "Fynn, the Fangbearer":

> *"Come, Koma, and reclaim what you lost! Or does the great serpent fear a rematch?"* ("Fynn, the Fangbearer" KHM/170)
>
> *"I always said I had a score to settle with that serpent. I'm a man of my word."* ("Fynn, the Fangbearer" MUL/26)

These suggest that Koma's reverence is not universal, and the being has adversaries in addition to worshippers. Namely Fynn, to whom these quotes can be attributed akin to dialogue, appears to hold a grudge against the being. Notably he is a human rather than an elf, suggesting that attitudes might vary across race. The latter text in particular, emphasised by the card illustration (see fig. 8), shows that Fynn ultimately slays Koma, undoubtedly causing major uproar in the Skemfar elvish religious landscape.

Aside from reverence for Koma, the flavour text on various other cards also suggests that the Skemfar religious landscape is more complicated:

> *Stripped of their divinity, the elves of Skemfar channeled their rage and sorrow into bloody brutality.* ("Skemfar Avenger" KHM/109)
>
> *Though imprisoned in Jaspera trees, the elvish gods known as the Einir still whisper through the ages.* ("Roots of Wisdom" KHM/190)
>
> *The most potent elvish tonics and potions are brewed from the trees containing their imprisoned gods, the Einir.* ("Revitalizing Repast // Old-Growth Grove" MH3/256)
>
> *Lathril, queen of the ancient Einir, left a powerful legacy for her mortal descendants.* ("Crown of Skemfar" KHC/13)

A number of things can be inferred from these examples, foremost that the elves of Skemfar were once divine beings themselves, and that they had living gods, the Einir. Both Koma and the Einir being portrayed as actual beings inherently suggests that the elvish religion is rooted in tangible

figures rather than the non-material. Alas, like Koma was ultimately slain, the Einir were somehow toppled and imprisoned in Jaspera trees; here a reader might make a connection with “Jaspera Sentinel” as a guardian to these trees. Besides working to further construct the setting of Skemfar, things can also be deduced about the character of Lathril. She is told to have been the queen of these living gods, and the emphasis put on her descendants’ mortality suggest that she might have been immortal; as the other cards suggest, however, she is now imprisoned in a tree and as such lacks agency and mobility as a character in her own right. The flavour texts also suggest that the elves of Skemfar are not content with the imprisonment of their Einir gods, particularly “Skemfar Avenger” showcasing a violent and vengeful psychological state. “Elderfang Disciple” likewise represents similar feelings regarding the disappearance of Koma. The flavour text of “Tyvar the Bellicose”, another card depicting the character Tyvar, in conjunction with the card illustration (see fig. 9) proposes that in the end the elves of Skemfar rally for a war to reclaim their lost divinity:

> *“Today, we become gods again.”* (“Tyvar the Bellicose” MAT/48)

This further echoes a violent and vengeful spirit rooted in elvish feelings of betrayal, showing that the elvish discontent is deep-rooted and culturally widespread, allowing the reader to view them as

Figure 9: "Tyvar the Bellicose" MAT/48

forced to act after being forced to adapt to changing social circumstances—the loss of beings they consider divine. In this context the adjective "Bellicose" in the card name is also notable, as its meaning as "demonstrating aggression and willingness to fight" reinforces the interpretation of the flavour text ("Bellicose"). However, the flavour text on "Bounty of Skemfar" contrasts this:

> *Even war cannot dull Skemfar's beauty.* ("Bounty of Skemfar" KHC/12)

Whereas "Tyvar the Bellicose" implies a war of reclamation, this flavour text contrasts the general idea of war with beauty, outlining a binary opposition where war is the opposite of beauty. This tells that war is ugly, but by contrasting this flavour text with "Tyvar the Bellicose" the implication is that it is sometimes a necessary state of being. However, violence itself is not frowned upon in Skemfar warrior culture, as further suggested by the following texts:

> *"Nothing I beat down stays down. I love this place!" —Tyvar* ("Noxious Revival" SPG/73)
>
> *"Our quarrels behind us. Our foes before us. Death or triumph for us all!"* ("Pact of the Serpent" KHC/9)
>
> *"Today, we feast! Tomorrow, we fight! Then, we feast again!" —Harald, king of Skemfar* ("Revitalizing Repast // Old-Growth Grove" MH3/256)

The flavour text of "Noxious Revival" attributes the quote therein to the character of Tyvar, who is not otherwise depicted in the card. It clearly points to Tyvar being fond of fighting—violence—and as such, with Tyvar being an elf from Skemfar, it cannot be entirely frowned upon in his culture. Likewise, the flavour text of "Revitalizing Repast // Old-Growth Grove", a quote attributed to Harald, hints at fighting being something potentially even prestigious (besides also characterising Harald as a gregarious personality and a rallying leader). Furthermore, the flavour text of "Pact of the Serpent" reinforces the idea that violence and war are sometimes necessary to ensure the survival of a culture; the text emphasises finding unity in the face of a common enemy, and the idea of going down with honour and dignity.

The flavour text broadly guides the reader to expand their mental models by explicitly explaining things akin to a narrator and by attributing quotes to things and characters the card or other cards depict. However, coherence made from the flavour text also often relies on the context created by the card name, types and illustration. The flavour texts are particularly effective when contrasted with each other, and reader engagement with those from multiple cards allows the construction of connections that then combine in the mental model.

3.4. Rules text: telling through game mechanics

Whereas the flavour text is primarily narrative in nature, the rules text of a *Magic* card is inherently tailored towards a ludic intent; it is about the effect and abilities a card has in gameplay. As such, the rules text is worded first and foremost in a way that facilitates gameplay rather than in a way that is strictly narrative. Ultimately, however, akin to the other elements, narrative content can be interpreted from the rules text of a card, but this interpretation, to an extent, relies on knowledge on the discourse of *Magic*, the underlying game. Through creative interpretation of the rules text as descriptions of qualities of characters and events, the reader can build upon the mental models established by the other elements and draw parallels between them and the rules text.

The rules text can be roughly sectioned into separate pieces. The core is the body of the rules text which may be split into separate paragraphs. *Keywords* exist either as part of the text body or positioned separately at the beginning, and they condense certain effects into a few words. In conjunction with keywords sometimes appears *reminder text*, italicised text placed in parentheses that explains a keyword's effect. Autumn Dodge and Paul Crutcher note that some keywords (such as *flying*) align with idiomatic English words (183), thus making them intuitively comprehensible to a degree. The reminder text is particularly useful when this does not take place, but does inherently explain a keyword's effect to greater detail regardless.

The power and toughness marks present on creature cards (and loyalty on planeswalker cards, defence on battle cards, both occupying the same space) might also be viewed as a part of the broader

rules text. These elements, which in the ludic sense imply how much damage the creature can assign and on the other hand how much they can absorb, can straightforwardly be read as numerical representations of a creature's physical prowess and vitality. Thus, "Tyvar the Bellicose" having a power of five distinguishes them as an exceptionally capable fighter, particularly when contrasted with a low-power creature such as "Jaspera Sentinel". His toughness of four also show a capability to take a beating. Comparing Tyvar's power and toughness to those of "Harald, King of Skemfar", three and two respectively, shows that he is in some regards more capable than the king of his people.

Similarly to flavour text, sometimes what is told through the rules text can link cards together and thus works to further define what is depicted by other cards. The second paragraph of the rules text on "Spark Rupture" (the name already suggesting drastic change involving *the spark*) reads as follows:

> Each planeswalker with one or more loyalty counters on it loses all abilities and is a creature with power and toughness each equal to the number of loyalty counters on it. ("Spark Rupture" MAT/5)

This card effect in its core changes planeswalkers to creatures, implying a loss of the spark that made them planeswalkers in the first place. Upon noting Tyvar's likeness as a part of the card illustration

Figure 10: "Spark Rupture" MAT/5

(see fig. 10) (placed in the framework of the set both cards come from) one can deduce that Tyvar has lost his spark, which is why he is portrayed as a creature in "Tyvar the Bellicose". This signifies a moment of character development, where Tyvar has now lost his ability to freely move across the planes of the Multiverse. It is a loss of mobility comparable to that of Lathril's, but does still leave some mobility as opposed to none.

The first paragraph of the rules text of "Tyvar the Bellicose", particularly in light of the aspects established from the flavour text and illustration, showcases effectiveness in leadership in battle:

> Whenever one or more Elves you control attack, they gain deathtouch until end of turn. ("Tyvar the Bellicose" MAT/48)

Notably present in this excerpt is the keyword *deathtouch*, which in the game of *Magic* makes any damage dealt by the creature lethal to other creatures. Thus, the excerpt tells that so long as Tyvar is in play, attacking elves are exceptionally deadly, suggesting effective leadership that invokes ferocity in his underlings. Similar connotations can also be interpreted from "Harald, King of Skemfar":

> Menace *(This creature can't be blocked except by two or more creatures.)* / When Harald, King of Skemfar enters the battlefield, look at the top five cards of your library. You may reveal an Elf, Warrior, or Tyvar card from among them and put it into your hand. Put the rest on the bottom of your library in a random order. ("Harald, King of Skemfar" KHM/212)

Here preceding the rules text body is the keyword menace and its explanation by reminder text; it assigns strength and capability to Harald, particularly in regards to combat. The text body then suggests that Harald's arrival at the battlefield rallies more of his kin to the cause, signalling skill in leadership.

There is ultimately a high degree of variance in the shape and form a *Magic* rules text can take. The rules text of the planeswalker card type, for example, "Tyvar Kell", is clearly different in form from the rules text of the creature card type, such as "Harald, King of Skemfar". Further variance also exists between split cards, two-sided cards, and certain card types and their subtypes. For

example, whereas cards of the enchantment type often resemble what might be labelled as generic rules text (virtually identical in form to the previous Harald example), the saga subtype has a unique layout of numbered paragraphs of rules text, though it poses some similarity to the planeswalker card type in this kind of chaptering. Already the name of the subtype—saga—suggests a self-contained story of some kind, this might potentially comparable to the concept of embedded narrative, i.e. "[a] narrative within a narrative" (Prince 36). The rules text of "Binding the Old Gods" (see fig. 11) read as follows:

> I Destroy target nonland permanent an opponent controls. / II Search your library for a Forest card, put it onto the battlefield tapped, then shuffle. / III Creatures you control gain deathtouch until end of turn. ("Binding the Old Gods" KHM/206)

As the card name puts it into context, a reader can deduce that the card's three sections tell the story of the elvish Einir gods being bound into the Jaspera trees. The first of these chapters destroys something from play, and the second chapter then brings a forest land card to play to replace it; first the Einir are brough down and then they are imprisoned in the forest. The third chapter then assigns the deathtouch keyword to any number of creatures, representing newfound strength to those who managed to defeat the elvish gods. This is centrally a description of a chain of events in the storyworld

Figure 11: "Binding the Old Gods" KHM/206

Figure 12: "Harald Unites the Elves" KHM/213

that marks a major drift in the setting and its inhabitants. This saga can then be contrasted with "Harald Unites the Elves" (see fig. 12) that reads as follows:

> I Mill three cards. You may put an Elf or Tyvar card from your graveyard onto the battlefield. / II Put a +1/+1 counter on each Elf you control. / III Whenever an Elf you control attacks this turn, target creature an opponent controls gets -1/-1 until end of turn. ("Harald Unites the Elves" KHM213)

This then tells a story about how Harald unites the elves of Skemfar. The first chapter utilises the keyword *mill*, which adds cards to the *graveyard* (discard pile), then returning a member of Harald's kin from the graveyard back to play (the battlefield); this might be interpreted as infighting, resulting in elves falling in battle, and then ultimately reaching a hand to them in an effort to reconcile. The second chapter then grants elves +1/+1 counters, buffing their power and toughness by one each, symbolising newfound vigour and strength as they unite. Finally, the third chapter contrastingly reduces enemy creatures' power and toughness, perhaps showcasing fear and weakness in face of the newly united elvish forces. In conjunction the two sagas suggest that after the loss of the Einir the elvish people fell into a state of disunity, potentially interwarring among each other before ultimately being united by Harald.

Interpretation of the rules text is inherently more abstract than that of the illustration and flavour text purely by the nature of its primary purpose being ludic rather than narrative. Deductions about characters, the setting and the wider storyworld are still possible through it, but require a degree of familiarity with the game of *Magic* to be coherent. As the rules text is the prominent textual element on the card face, being allocated the most space, it is particularly effective at describing qualities and abilities of the things and characters individual cards depict, though requires more creative interpretation as this description is not straightforward or direct, especially when compared to narrator-like functions of the flavour text.

4. Conclusion

The objective of this thesis was to analyse how *Magic: The Gathering* trading cards construct the game's storyworld and support the reader in constructing a mental image of it. It can be concluded that the trading card medium utilises showing, specifically through its illustration, as well as telling through its textual elements. These guide the reader to make connections between individual elements as well as separate cards, and through these connections the reader can construct meaningful pieces that combine into coherent wholes—the mental models of the storyworld, its setting(s) and its inhabitants, the characters. In the context that is constructed by the card name and that is further defined, narrowed and categorised by the card types, the reader can interpret semiotic cues from the illustration as well as the flavour and rules texts to assign features to characters, their setting and the relations these have to each other. As this thesis has demonstrated, a number of things can be inferred from individual cards, but a coherent mental model requires engagement with multiple thematically interconnected cards. These connections can best be made within a certain set of cards (in this thesis with 2021's *Kaldheim*), even though additional information for supporting mental model construction is also found in other sets. However, interpretation and understanding of all the information the trading cards offer requires a degree of previous familiarity with *Magic: The Gathering* as a trading card game, especially concerning areas where game mechanics and ludic intent suggest something that cannot otherwise be easily deduced. Further difficulty also arises from the distribution model (as I briefly mentioned earlier), where a potential reader has little control over the assortment of cards they get a hold of. Thus, locating the cards with interrelations may become difficult without significant financial investment, or requires engagement with the secondary market in order to acquire specific cards. A potential remedy might be to approach the cards through other avenues, such as online image galleries (such as *Scryfall*), essentially eliminating the financial factor. Ultimately, however, a reader's mental image of the storyworld constructed only through engagement with trading cards would still be only partial and fragmentary.

This thesis also set out with the larger objective of inspiring and facilitating further research into *Magic: The Gathering* and trading cards in general. The medium is in many regards under-researched, and therefore provides ample opportunities for further study. Ultimately, the broad perspectives of narratology could in many ways be adapted to analysis of the trading card medium; particularly worth highlighting would be the role of trading cards in the wider tradition of transmedial storytelling. Trading card games have an undeniable place in the landscape of contemporary culture, and as such they are deserving of far more inquiry into their inner workings.

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