Nikita Johnson
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Luna Loganayagam
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How has representation improved in *Magic: the Gathering*?

Magic: the Gathering (*Magic*) is a trading card game played since 1993 by people from all over the world and all walks of life. Because of its history, cultural importance, and international reach, *Magic* must represent all of its players. This representation can be in card art, the main characters of the story, and who Wizards of the Coast (WOTC), the company that produces *Magic*, chooses to work with. Representation of historically marginalized groups has improved over time. This representation is present in the game itself, which now has multiple openly queer characters, POC protagonists, and a diverse collection of worlds. It's also true in the real-life workings of WOTC: they hire cultural consultants, partner with and lift up creators from minority communities, and support charities and organizations that help those groups, such as the Trevor Project for the trans community and Black Girls CODE for black Americans. As a longtime *Magic* player, I'm delighted with their improvements because they increase the game's reach while promoting inclusive values.

Richard Garfield created *Magic* in the early 1990s in Washington state. It started as a game played between rounds of *Dungeons and Dragons* but eventually grew into a phenomenon all its own. In the early days, most art on cards featuring humans was of white men, and the main characters were all white men, like the brothers Urza and Mishra, who were the central characters for the first half-decade of *Magic*. Early *Magic* also struggled to keep its card art and names out of derogatory territory, with cards such as "Invoke Prejudice," which featured art of hooded figures that looked like Klan members, and "Cleanse," a white card that had an effect

that only killed black creature cards. WOTC has since banned these cards from all tournament play and officially apologized for their printing, but the fact that they printed cards like these in the first place shows the extent of early *Magic*'s diversity problems. For the first twenty years of *Magic's* history, the only two large-scale representations of non-Western cultures took place in the African-inspired *Mirage* and the Japanese-inspired *Kamigawa* sets.

In the past decade, however, *Magic* has gone to many more realms inspired by other cultures: *Tarkir* (pan-Asia), *Kaladesh* (South Asia), *Amonkhet* (Egypt), *Ixalan* (Mesoamerica/ Hispanic America), along with returns to *Kamigawa* and *Ixalan* and a return to *Tarkir* planned for the near future (MTG Wiki, 2023). *Magic* has also started depicting many more people of color in scenes all across Magic's multiverse, such as Jadar, a black man on Innistrad, the mostly German-inspired gothic horror plane. In recent years, *Magic* has also been much more conscious of sexual and gender minorities. Some LGBTQ+ characters include the lovers Saheeli and Huatli, the non-binary aetherborn race of *Kaladesh*, the planeswalkers Ral Zarek and Ashiok, and, recently, many minor characters. While most characters remain cishet (like the majority of people), the *Magic* community doesn't consider this the "default" anymore. WOTC has also supported organizations such as the Trevor Project and Black Girls CODE by selling merchandise with profits going to those charities. Their partnerships have mostly grown organically, although it's worth noting that WOTC's collaboration with Black Girls CODE only took place in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. *Magic* and WOTC have improved their inclusivity over the years by first taking out prejudicial content and, more recently, going out of their way to be sincerely inclusive of all groups.

Representation in *Magic* is crucial because of how far-reaching it has become. *Magic* is in a dozen languages, and, by some estimates, over forty million people play it worldwide. It's a fascinating and enjoyable game to play. It draws in all sorts of people, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or other identity. If *Magic* didn't represent its player base properly, it would alienate those deemed different from the norm, which is why WOTC has made excellent decisions to cater to its vast audience. For example, the people that I play with regularly include a large number of gay and transgender people and many people of color. Many of the queer players were excited when *Magic* released a product called *Pride Across the Multiverse* that reprinted many well-known cards with new art prominently featuring LGBTQ+ characters and symbols of the queer community. In addition, I know that many players of Latin American heritage are happy about the return to Ixalan, a setting with factions, places, and characters reminiscent of Mesoamerican and Hispanic life, such as a tamal vendor, a character named "Abuelo" (grandfather in Spanish), and many depictions of symbols that look like Mayan runes (Sagahon, 2023). Efforts like these have made *Magic* more accessible to players from all backgrounds and have markedly increased its popularity with a broader audience.

Magic is one of the most popular games ever, so it follows that people have developed processes for communication and exclusive jargon to talk about it. *Magic* has large communities on YouTube, Reddit, Discord, and other social media and at game stores internationally. *Magic*'s large following engages with the mechanical side of the cards that WOTC chooses to print and shows the company how the community feels about the steps *Magic* has taken to be more representative. To give an example, when a writer of the *Magic* story retconned a main character named Chandra, who was pansexual, to be straight, the *Magic* community was up in arms about

it and let WOTC know that what they were doing wasn't acceptable (Reddit, 2019). WOTC later

revised the story, apologized, and Chandra once again became an iconic queer character. I found

accounts of this on Reddit and Twitter. Because *Magic* is a consumer product, players can exert

significant power in the larger discourse community.

In my research on this topic, I used a site called Scryfall Tagger. Scryfall Tagger is a

website created and maintained by the *Magic* community, not by WOTC. Members assign

gameplay and art tags to each card, such as "attack trigger" (gameplay) or "green fumes" (art), so

that people can use Scryfall Tagger (and its parent site, Scryfall) to look up cards. As an avid

Magic deckbuilder and player, I utilize it regularly to find cards for my decks based on their

gameplay function. However, Scryfall Tagger's art tags were productive when researching

attributes of card art. I used the art tags "person of color" and "lgbtq" to find cards with art of

characters that matched those descriptions. Using those and sorting by year of print, I found that

most cards with those tags (especially the "lgbtq" tag) are relatively recent (Scryfall, 2023). I

used Scryfall Tagger because I know its syntax and use cases well. Scryfall Tagger and the

Scryfall website are known to *Magic* players as an excellent repository of knowledge about all

25,000+ cards. I also referenced official WOTC product announcements, which contained more

information about promotions with groups mentioned before, such as the Trevor Project and

Black Girls CODE (Wizards of the Coast, 2021). I looked at the release schedule of all of the

Magic sets and their settings to learn more about when WOTC decided to represent different

groups, such as South Asian people in *Kaladesh*. Both of these resources were helpful for me to

understand the timeline of representation in *Magic*.

This project would benefit from a visual aspect. This project has discussed much of the visual side of *Magic* cards, but the uninformed reader probably doesn't even know what a typical *Magic* card looks like. I could make this project into a slideshow or YouTube video with visuals to explain the points made, including examples of card art, excerpts from official story articles, and images of people involved with *Magic*, including WOTC employees, online content creators, and everyday players. A visual aspect would bolster my argument by showing evidence of *Magic*'s improvement in representation rather than relying on what I choose to write about.

Magic: the Gathering has made strides in its representation of all people. From its one-sided and occasionally problematic early days, *Magic* has grown into a globe-spanning game played by millions of people who can all see themselves reflected in aspects of the game, whether that's in card art, in the game's rich lore and story, or in the people who design *Magic*, create content about it online, and play it in game stores, on kitchen tables, and in *Magic* clubs. WOTC's work with charitable organizations, its continuing inclusion of POC and LGBTQ+ characters, and its depiction of diverse worlds in-game all represent *Magic*'s marked improvement in representation.

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