


***Magic: The Gathering's Final Fantasy* Set Looks Like a Match Made in Seventh Heaven**

io9 recently got a look at what to expect from Wizards of the Coast's biggest crossover yet—and found plenty to appeal to fans of *Magic* and *Final Fantasy* alike.

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Magic: The Gathering's crossover era has been a divisive one for longtime players. Although there's still [plenty of original expansions](#) to the venerable card game, the rise of “Universes Beyond,” Wizards' umbrella for what has become a swath of licensed crossovers with everything from [SpongeBob SquarePants](#) to [Lord of the Rings](#), has become increasingly prominent—and for as many intrigued fans of those other franchises it's brought in, there's pushback that Wizards has traded its original worldbuilding for the card game equivalent of a *Fortnite* match.

That dividing push and pull among *Magic* fans and curious onlookers is on the precipice of facing its biggest test next month with the release of *Magic's* 105th expansion: [Final Fantasy](#). It's arguably Wizards' most ambitious crossover yet, a collaboration with a fantasy world as vast, as long-running, and

as equally equipped with a voracious, opinionated fanbase as *Magic*'s.

The first Universes Beyond set to be made legal in the game's standard constructed format, the barriers between what is a licensed crossover and what is "normal" *Magic* aren't just thin, they've been sliced open with a buster sword. And it's already proving to be popular: pre-orders for the set are now difficult to come by, as parent company Hasbro anticipates that *Final Fantasy* could be one of the game's most lucrative sets ever.

But the pressure isn't just coming from *Magic* fans. *Final Fantasy* is one of the most famous video game series of all time, 16 mainline games (and yet further myriad spinoffs, sequels, remakes, and re-imaginings beyond them) that have shaped the story of the roleplaying game genre for nearly 40 years. That legacy, of course, includes its own card game, but a *Magic* crossover is like meeting tabletop royalty: what's included and what isn't, how and why this should all happen, and how much *Final Fantasy* should be in it has been a hot topic of debate ever since the set was first tentatively teased back in 2023.

But the story of the set has been in the works for much longer than that: Wizards of the Coast and Square Enix have been pondering a *Magic/Final Fantasy* crossover for five years,

basically almost as long as knowledge of the Universes Beyond crossover format has been public.

“There were a couple of factors,” Zakeel Gordon, *Magic* Tabletop Product Architect at Wizards of the Coast, told press at a recent briefing ahead of the *Final Fantasy* set’s first major public preview at PAX East this weekend. “One is that we built this set simultaneously in English and Japanese for our partners at Square Enix—that included multiple trips over to them for play tests, worldbuilding workshops, *Final Fantasy* mini-schools to figure out what was important to them. We would come up with design iterations, fly over, and they would say ‘we really like these things, we would prefer if you tweak this like this.’”

“But this is also the second ever Universes Beyond tentpole release [after *Lord of the Rings: Tales of Middle-earth*]. We wanted to make sure we were doing everything correctly. We wanted to make sure that the final product met our expectation, and was done in a way that we really think would excite players... in order to do all of that right, it just takes some time.”

Just as the pressure on the *Final Fantasy* set to live up to expectations is coming from *Magic* and *Final Fantasy* fans alike, passion for the project is echoed across Wizards and

Square Enix. “It’s so fun, any time we get to work with another game studio, many of them are also really passionate about *Magic*,” Gordon continued. “Our main producers [at Square] are also lifelong *Magic* players. We would finish up our meetings, and then we’d go play Commander, or they’d talk to us about Legacy and show us their collections.”

The passion on both Square Enix and Wizards’ behalf doesn’t erase the fact that the new set faces a daunting prospect: encapsulating 16 mainline games (sorry, *Tactics*, *X-2*, or *Dirge of Cerberus* fans, there’s no spinoff representation here) across hundreds of cards, each one filled with famous story beats, locations, characters, spells, and creatures to draw inspiration from.

“One of the challenges of balancing the slots in the set—what do we need to fill, what is the mechanical need for a card, what is the flavor reason that we need a card—was that we wanted to get a certain amount of cards per game in the set,” Dillon Deveney, *Magic* principle narrative designer, explained. “We started there, and then we decided ‘well, how much do we expect to see from *this* game? How many fans of *this* game, that are going to want to see X, Y, Z? How big is *this* game, right?”

Wizards modulated its approach for each game further beyond that into what it considered a kind of tier system. After

consulting internally among *Final Fantasy* fans at Wizards' own offices, and with Square Enix for insight from developers who worked across the series, the *Magic* team broke down potential inclusions across three tiers of fandom.

“Tier one was ‘we have to include this, it’s evergreen, it’s the baseline expectation,’ like Chocobos and Moogles,” Deveney said. “Tier two is for a fan of a specific game that would go ‘Oh yeah, I totally remember that’... these could be iconic minigames, sidequests and powerful weapons, or a super boss you remember struggling against. Tier three is the superfan, diehard Easter egg moment that’s like ‘no way, they got *this* in the game, that’s crazy!’ We wanted to use that as a system to make decisions and choices to figure out what from all the games would fit into our game.”

That sorts out the *Final Fantasy* element of the set. But at the end of the day, this is still a *Magic: The Gathering* expansion—an important one too, as the first Universes Beyond set to be officially legal in the standard play format. The set doesn’t just have to execute on a referential standpoint, it has to push *Magic* mechanically, and include a wide swath of card archetypes to make it appeal to regular players.

Thankfully, it seems like *Final Fantasy* will deliver on that aspect too, from what was shown to press of the set so far. The

set includes evolutions of certain *Magic* mechanics, like Job Select, a riff on For Mirrodin or Living Weapon that creates hero tokens that players will then attach equipment cards to inspired by *Final Fantasy* jobs from the original game (and ones added down the line, like those included in *Final Fantasy XIV*). There's also Tiered, an entirely new mechanic that reflects *Final Fantasy*'s own magic system, where spells grow in power across three levels of strength, letting players pay more mana to amplify the card's damage.

It includes clever uses of *Magic* game mechanics to retell flavorful plot beats from various games, like Kain, Traitorous Dragoon swapping player control on damage and creating treasure tokens, reflecting the moment in *Final Fantasy IV* where he's brainwashed by the villainous Golbez and turns on the party. Or, for fans of *Final Fantasy VII* and generational trauma, Aerith Gainsborough's card gaining counters whenever her player gains life... only to pass those counters around to other legendary creatures you control when she dies.

The whole set is littered with details like this. A regular mechanic throughout the set is Transform—used to both show villainous transformations of iconic characters like *FFVII*'s Kefka, *IX*'s Kuja, or *XIV*'s Emet-Selch as they go from their primary forms to their final boss identities, but also to reflect a character's long arc over the course of their respective games,

like *FFIV*'s Cecil being able to switch from Dark Knight to Paladin, or *FFVI*'s Terra being able to transform to her Esper form for a limited time. There's also the use of the Saga card archetype—a card that enters the battlefield, progresses through a series of “chapters” turn after turn, and then expires—to represent the various Summons from across the franchise, like Bahamut or Valigarmanda.

Not all of the references are just for *Final Fantasy* fans, either. Throughout the set, fan-favorite *Magic* cards will be re-printed with classic artwork from across *Final Fantasy* to reflect the connection between the set's source material and the games, like *FFIX*'s Zidane being used to re-flavor Ragavan, Nimble Pilferer; *FFII*'s Firion re-flavoring Sram, Senior Edificer; or *FFVII*'s Yuffie taking on the powerful Yuriko, the Tiger's Shadow.

And some are just plain goofy, like multicolored variants of the Traveling Chocobo card to reflect the rainbow of options seen in *Final Fantasy VII*'s Chocobo racing minigame, or the fact that there are *15 variants* of the Cid, Timeless Artificer card: all with the same rules (including one that lets you field as many versions of Cid in a deck as you'd want), but each with different artwork celebrating each version of the character that existed from *Final Fantasy II* all the way through to *XVI*.

Suffice to say, it's clear looking at the cards Wizards have shown off so far that the *Magic* team's passion for the source material is shining through clearly, perhaps more than any of the Universes Beyond material we've seen from the game so far.

"If there was something awesome we wanted to do [in the set], we got to do it," Gavin Verhey, *Magic*'s principle game designer, said. "You'll see all kinds of fun surprises as you go through the set, it's really special."

"We recently got the first booster boxes in the offices, and we got to get the team together to do a draft, and after years of working on it, just sitting around a table the way all our players are going to do... every single card in this set is like a carefully handcrafted gift," Verhey concluded. "We've put so much time, and energy, and research into it, and I just really hope that as you see the cards you see some of that come through."

"When it comes to Universes Beyond, there's a lot of different sentiments among the player base about how they feel about certain cards, and certain sets," Deveney added. "This one was made for *you*: if you're a fan, you want to get into the franchise, if you just really like *Magic* sets... this was made for you, by people who really just want you to have a great Friday night

with your friends... that's kind of the ultimate goal, just to reconnect and have a great time."

Magic: The Gathering – Final Fantasy releases June 13.

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