

# The Connection Between Mechanics and Narrative: How Are Fantasy Card Games Reflecting Their Stories

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## INTRODUCTION

Many Fantasy Card Games Such As *Yu-Gi-Oh! The Trading Card Game* (*Yu-Gi-Oh*)(Konami 1999) and *Magic: The Gathering* (*Magic*)(Wizards of the Coast 1993) utilise narrative play. Narrative play is narrative that unfolds in gameplay through player interpretation (Salen and Zimmerman 2003) (Dubbelman 2016); which was the focus in creating *Level UP! Heroes* (Profaca 2023-Ongoing). In analysing how *Level UP! Heroes*' mechanics support narrative play, this paper offers understanding of different aspects and alternative thought processes behind it.

Narrative play engages players' interest in fantasy card games. Dashiell defines narrative as 'an active effort of idea construction and reflection within the structure of the game' (2016); and narrative in these games allow players to reflect what it means for them. In utilising 'one of the most powerful narrative devices' (Dubbelman 2016), *Level UP! Heroes* weaves narrative through its mechanics in typing, abilities, stages, actions, and board mechanics; each mechanic adapted to reflect this. The prototype demonstrates a template for creators to adapt in their own unique games.

Narrative play has limitations as the construction of stories are embodied in the mind of the player (Dubbelman 2016). *Magic* (Wizards of the Coast 1993) and *Yu-Gi-Oh* (Konami 1999) combat this by publishing external information in books, videos, and shows; so *Level UP! Heroes* has established an external story. Dashiell (2016) notes that *Magic* has its narrative dismissed by players viewing the game only as 'the thing people are playing'. This lack of active thought requires creators to push importance on the narrative and embody it through gameplay; achieved in designing 'compelling premises and unique characters' (Fullerton 2008), helping players connect to the game.

*Level UP! Heroes*' prototype deck, *Quartel's Quintessential Quest*, features three categories of character cards that offer multiple placements: Hero, Companion, and Supporter cards. The deck has four main Hero cards, each with three levels, and six Companion/Supporter cards. The main heroes are: *Dr Valentine Quartel*, *Calliope Quartel*, *Miriam Quartel*, and *Macak Quartel*; with *Harriet Quartel* being an important Companion/Supporter character. They are linked in name due to being family; featuring abilities that benefit one another.

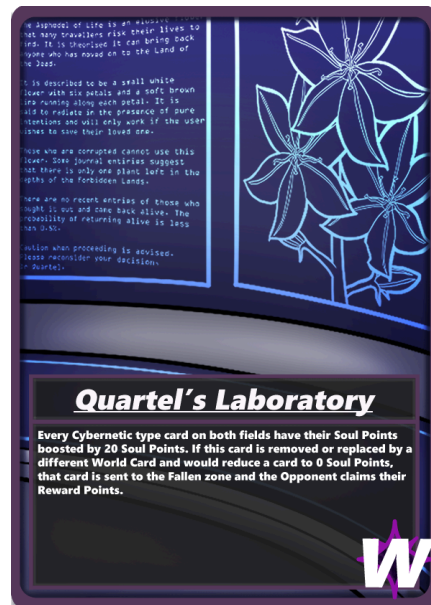


(Figure 1 & 2: Level 1: Dr Valentine Quartel and Level 1: Calliope Quartel from Level UP! Heroes)



(Figure 3 & 4: Level 1: Miriam Quartel and Level 1: Macak Quartel from Level UP! Heroes)

Both *Magic* and *Yu-Gi-Oh*, like *Level UP! Heroes* link mechanics with narrative references or unique mechanics. *Yu-Gi-Oh*'s *Fallen of Albaz* card can change into different dragons depending on what element he touches; linking to key moments in his story. In *Level UP! Heroes*, *Quartel's Laboratory* boosts all Cybernetic type cards Soul Points, because three of the main Quartel cards have a Cybernetic typing. Both use typing to link to multiple cards together narratively.



(Figure 5: *Quartel's Laboratory* from *Level UP! Heroes*)

*Magic* uses a unique mechanic called Transform like in *Awakened Dream/Persistent Nightmare* where the player flips the card to determine which effect is active. *Level UP! Heroes* doesn't have a comparative mechanic, however cards activate different effects, depending on field placement, to reflect individuals in a hero's journey.

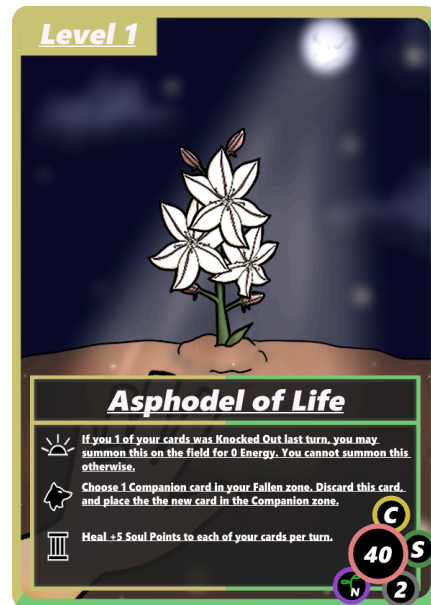
*Level UP! Heroes* focuses on mechanics to portray stories. In designing 'meaningful play' (Salen and Zimmerman 2003), it was understood that most of the narrative takes place through the emergent narrative causing it to change between each player's experience. For example, by breaking down *Awakened Guardian Angel* from *Level UP! Heroes*, one can see its mechanics' relevance to narrative play.



(Figure 6 & 7: *Level 2: Awakened Guardian Angel* and *Level 1: The Spirit of Harriet Quartel* from *Level UP! Heroes*)

*Awakened Guardian Angel* is a level 2, Spirit type Companion card, with the ability to redirect any damage to itself. The card could be interpreted as having a guardian role,

ethereal in nature, and working hard to help others. Its art and abilities are reflective of *Harriet Quartel* cards, implying through these aspects that they are the same character. The embedded narrative is that *Harriet Quartel* is the deceased wife of *Dr Valentine Quartel*, but players don't inherently know this with the current available cards. While in the same deck as other *Quartel* cards, the player could interpret it as her protecting her family—which is the intended narrative—or could interpret her as a protector. Balancing intended narrative with deck customisation is difficult, but allows players to create their own narratives. As a result, this open-ended interpretation can stretch to make many different narratives.



(Figure 8: Level 1: *Asphodel of Life* from *Level UP! Heroes*)

In playtests with *Level UP! Heroes*, players made commentary on the narratives they created, such as being able to resurrect their Hero with *Asphodel of Life*; later remarking how they could see the intended narrative once it was explained. It was playtested with a small group to balance the mechanics, although some refinement is needed in getting players to innately recognise the narrative. Players could see the connection between cards due to the abilities referencing other cards and card art. The next step is to create more for players to have a variety of narrative experiences. *Level UP! Heroes* works to improve the connection between fantasy card games and narrative mechanics by providing a guide for creators to design different possibilities in play design.

## BIO

Chase Profaca is a graduate student from RMIT University in the Master of Animation, Games and Interactivity. They have a background in games design, character creation, world building, and card games. They are known for their efforts in the game *Butterfly Dollhouse* and working within ACMI X to create *Let Me Out*. They are currently working on the ongoing project of *Level UP! Heroes*, a fantasy card game with a particular focus on narrative mechanics.

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