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**Making Magic** Monday, March 18, 2002

## The Write Stuff

### My favorite flavors



Mark Rosewater

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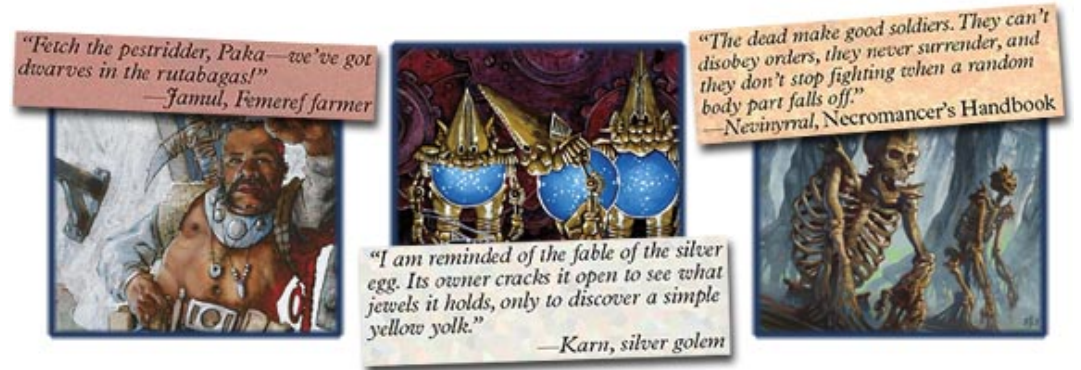
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**Making Magic**  
[In a Teapot](#)  
 Mark recalls Tempest fondly  
 by Mark Rosewater

Welcome to Flavor Text Week. Yes, this week we'll be exploring a facet of the game that has no direct impact on game play. Why? Because **Magic** is more than just attacking and blocking. **Magic** has flavor. No place is this more apparent than in the names, art, and flavor text. While the first two will no doubt get their day in the sun, this week is taking a look at the latter. This is all leading up to our cool new feature called the FlavOracle that will debut at the end of the week.

As I mentioned before, my last gig before this one was that of a writer. Thus, I have been proud during my time here to have had written numerous pieces of **Magic** flavor text. In this week's column, I am going to take a look behind the scenes of ten of my favorite pieces. Just as I try to give you insight into how cards are created, I wanted you to see how a piece of flavor text comes into being.

Be aware that my flavor text writing has dropped off considerably in the last few years (too many other cool things to do), so most of my favorites come from the *Mirage* and *Tempest* blocks.



**10) Luminous Guardian (Odyssey)** -- **"There is no victory without virtue."**

One of the challenges of writing flavor text is trying to get a big idea conveyed in as few words as possible. Besides being concise, flavor text also needs to have some rhythm and flow (it needs to sound nice). This flavor text is one of my favorites of my more serious pieces because it captures a nice flavor of white in six words, and it does so with alliteration (the key words start with the same letter).

Another important role of flavor text is to convey the richness of the colors' philosophies. This piece explores an important tenet of white: White believes in a moral order. A white mage feels he is responsible to a higher calling. Unlike black, white does not believe that the end justifies the means. To white the way you win is more important than winning.

**9) Dwarven Berserker (Weatherlight)** -- **"I may be small, but I can kick your butt."**

Another role of flavor text is to try to give flavor to different aspects of the game. As all of you who read my [cephalid column](#) know, I'm a fan of dwarves. One of my problems with dwarves in **Magic** has always been that they don't have enough consistent flavor. During *Weatherlight* I tried to push my view of how I'd like to see dwarves.

Dwarves are in red, and red is the center of emotions. I thought it would be cool if dwarves had a society where emotions often got the better of them. From day to day they go about their work, but

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every once in a while they just snap. Other creatures in Dominaria treat the dwarves much like we would treat a crazy person. You don't want to say anything to upset them.

As a subset of this idea, I loved the concept that dwarves had an inferiority complex. If they perceive that you are picking on them, they get angry. The **Dwarven Berserker** was my attempt to introduce this concept. Unfortunately, the flavor never really caught on and the dwarves are still looking for their "hook."

#### 8) Pacifism (Mirage) -- *For the first time in his life, Grakk felt a little warm and fuzzy inside.*

Most of the time, the flavor text writers submit their pieces before the art comes in. This is one of a handful of cards where I was able to write the flavor text based on the art. Rob Bliss had drawn a wonderful picture and I was interested in writing a piece of flavor text to complement it. Here's what I had to work with:



Obviously, the focus of the piece is the monster in the center. I knew the flavor text had to be about him. I named him Grakk as I wanted to get a hard, guttural name to play up that he's a big bad monster. Next, I knew I wanted to contrast this meanness with a softer side brought about by the **Pacifism**.


The piece that was chosen, by the way, was actually my second favorite piece I wrote for this card. My favorite was "Grakk later felt guilty about eating their mother." Unfortunately, the flavor text team (the ones responsible for selecting the pieces) thought it was a little too much, so we went with the piece that now appears on the card.

#### 7) Awakening (Stronghold) -- *"There are times when destiny calls forth a people and demands an action. Now is the time. We are the people. This is our action. Charge!" -- Eladamri, Lord of Leaves*

Often for **Magic** flavor text, we need to write quotations to put directly into characters' mouths. This piece, for example, required Eladamri to rile up his troops. In the story, he was about to send his army of elves into a battle where they were most likely about to get slaughtered.

While writing this piece I looked at some famous political quotes. My inspiration ended up being some speeches by former U.S. President John F. Kennedy. I really liked how JFK made an audience feel like they were invested in solving whatever problem he was discussing.


For this piece, I knew I wanted to end with Eladamri screaming out the call to charge. For purpose of rhythm, I used a speech with three beats. (In the world of writing, this is known as the Rule of Three.) There was also one other cool little trick we did with this flavor text. To see what it is, check out Wednesday's "Magic Arcana."

**6) Bottle Gnomes (Tempest)**  -- *"I am reminded of the fable of the silver egg. Its owner cracks it open to see what jewels it holds, only to discover a simple yellow yolk."* -- Karn, silver golem

When the *Weatherlight* Saga was introduced in *Weatherlight*, the flavor text team tried an experiment. To give a consistent voice to the major **Magic** characters, each crew member was assigned to a different writer. I was assigned **Ertai** and **Karn**. Ertai was easy to write as he just oozed cockiness (Ben Bleiweiss will delve into Ertai more on Wednesday). Karn was a little more of a challenge.


Karn filled the role of gentle giant. He was the big powerful character that shunned violence. Instead of being a fighter, he was a thinker. To reflect this quality, I decided that it would be cool to have Karn collect parables. Parables are little stories with moral. Most of Karn's flavor text in *Tempest* reflected this idea.

Telling parables in flavor text is a challenge as I had to tell a full story in two or three lines of text. **Bottle Gnomes** was my favorite of Karn's parables as it told a very poignant little story in a single sentence.

**5) Drudge Skeletons (6th, 7th Edition)**  -- *"The dead make good soldiers. They can't disobey orders, they never surrender, and they don't stop fighting when a random body part falls off."* --Nevinyrral, *Necromancer's Handbook*


Now we start getting to my humorous pieces. Remember, I come from a background as a comedy writer, so this is where I've done some of my best work. This flavor text was actually written for a card in *Urza's Saga*. Unfortunately, the flavor text team didn't pick it. So when I was working on the flavor text for *Sixth Edition*, I submitted it again. That flavor text team *did* choose it.

This flavor text reflects my belief that the undead have great comedy potential. Also, I'm a big fan of using dark humor on black cards. I should note that the attribution to Nevinyrral wasn't mine (although I like it). Pete Venters, then the head of Continuity, added it when he put it into the *Sixth Edition* file. I am responsible for the reference to the *Necromancer's Handbook*. The idea of such a book was actually my inspiration for this quote. I figured, how does a young necromancer learn how to raise the dead?

**4) Repentance (Tempest)**  -- *"The cannon wasn't aimed at you!" pleaded Vhati. "I'm not sure which is more pathetic," replied Greven, "your judgment or your aim."*

While the *Weatherlight* crew members were all assigned flavor text writers, the villains were left open to everyone. One of my favorite contributions to *Tempest* was a series of three cards that spelled out a little scene between **Greven il-Vec** and **Vhati il-Dal**. To see the whole scene, check out tomorrow's "Magic Arcana."

Of the three pieces, this one's my favorite. My goal with this card was to introduce Greven. I wanted to capture his special combination of cruelty, bluntness and disregard. If *Tempest* were a movie, I felt that this was the kind of line people would quote.

**3) Chicken a la King (Unglued)**  -- *During the Chicken Revolution, the king managed to keep his head while the others -- well, just ran around.*

Back in my stand-up days, I used to sit around with other comedians discussing how comedy worked. One of the popular theories was that comedy was all about juxtaposition. That is, comedy was about connecting two things that aren't normally connected.

This card's flavor text started with the card's name. I knew I wanted a chicken lord in *Unglued* (after all, it did have a strong chicken theme). My wife Lora, then my fiancée, suggested **Chicken a la King**. The second I heard it, I knew we had our name. In the flavor text, I felt I needed to reference that he was a king.

While thinking about this, I stumbled into thinking about Louis XVI. This led to thinking about the French Revolution, which of course led to thinking about the guillotine. And then the thunderbolt struck. There was an expression about chickens losing their heads. Once I had those two pieces, it was merely an exercise and coming up with the most elegant wording.

## 2) Dwarven Miner (*Mirage*) -- "Fetch the pestridder, Paka -- we've got dwarves in the rutabagas!" -- Jamul, Femeref farmer

I have a silly side. (Shocking, I know.) While *Unglued* had a chance to let this side of me shine, there are only a few places in tournament **Magic** where I've let down my proverbial hair.

Norse and Tolkien mythology established dwarves as miners. They like to burrow through the ground. Then it dawned on me that gophers also burrow through the ground. Wouldn't it be funny if I treated dwarves like they were gophers?

From time to time writers grow irrationally attracted to something they've written. I don't know why, but this piece cracked me up. So much so that I got it into the set by sheer willpower. You see, in comedy, there is a little chart about how much of something is funny. It goes something like this: A little bit is funny. A bit more isn't funny. A lot more gets funny again.

My plan was simple: I was going to hammer the flavor text team with this joke until it reached the third stage. So I referenced the joke every chance I got. After a few weeks of the team wanting to kill me, the joke finally got funny again.

A few notes about this quote. I chose the name Paka because it sounded like a peasant name and it had the right beat to it. I used the term pestridder because it was the best made-up fantasy way I could come up with to say exterminator. And I chose rutabaga because it's a funny vegetable.

Quick aside -- back in my stand-up days, we played a game called "Not Funny, Funny, Very Funny." The way it worked was that one person would name a topic, such as vegetables, and another person would have to name three items. The first would have to be not funny. The second had to be funny, but not too funny. And the third had to be very funny. So for vegetables, the game would go like this:

Vegetables!  
Not Funny -- Corn  
Funny -- Eggplant  
Very Funny -- Rutabaga

Let's try one more topic:

Animals!  
Not funny -- Bird  
Funny -- Cow  
Very Funny -- Platypus

Feel free to play with your friends.

## 1) Reparations (*Mirage*) -- "Sorry I burned down your village. Here's some gold."

Every artist has the piece they'll always be remembered for. This is my *Mona Lisa*.

Here's how this piece came into existence. It was very early in the morning one day in the winter of 1996, and I had been up for over twenty hours. My puzzle book (a collection of **Magic** puzzles based on my *Duelist* puzzle column) was about to go to film and I was working with my friend Michael Ryan. Michael was the editor on my book and he was very carefully doing a final proofread. After Michael checked each page, I would check to make sure that his corrections were, in fact, correct. Since Michael's job took much longer than mine, I had a good deal of time to kill.

At the time Michael was a **Magic** editor and he and I were both on the flavor text team for *Mirage*. So while Michael proofed my book, I tried to come up with some flavor text for the few cards that still needed some. But it was late and I was punchy. So, instead of writing real flavor text, I was simply trying to come up with ones that I thought would crack Michael up.

Reparations had proven to be a toughie. The art had come in, so I was looking at it trying to use it for inspiration. Here's what I saw:



The thing that kept nagging me was, what the hell was happening here? There was this white priest and a black couple. The priest was offering the couple a chest filled with gold pieces. And there was a fire off to the side. What the heck?

I found this situation weird enough that I just wrote a piece of flavor text that hit the scene head on. It made me laugh so I showed it to Michael. Michael also laughed very hard. I then put the flavor text away with no intention of submitting it. It was funny at three in the morning, but I never thought the flavor text team would put it on a card.

At the next flavor text team meeting, Michael brought up the flavor text. Another member of the team, Bill Rose, also thought it was very funny. As Michael, Bill, and I were three of the four members of the team, a majority liked it. So we put it in the file. I had assumed that someone would eventually veto it down the line, but no one ever did.

And that is how my most famous piece of flavor text came to see the light of day.


Well, that's all for this column. I hope you enjoyed this detour into the world of words. Join me next week when I put on my professor cap and begin a class I call Design 101.

Until then, may you choose not mulligan and then topdeck the land you need.

Mark Rosewater

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