

## Artist, gamer, jock

# Behind the Canvas: Matt Cavotta

Toby Wachter

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*Every month, Toby Wachter will interview a different **Magic** artist. This will allow the **Magic** community to get a peek at the lives of the people who create the images of the game, and will also provide a look into the unique process each artist takes producing the cool pictures we're all familiar with.* **Matt Cavotta whispers sweet nothings to the Scandalmonger.**

Our first artist, Matt Cavotta, is best known to players as the man behind Anavolver, Questing Phelddagrif, Noble Panther, and Iridescent Angel. As you can tell from most of his work, Matt has a unique style that strays a bit from conventional fantasy art. "It's a funny thing; when I look at my work I do not see a style, I only see it the way I see it. What I can say is that I do try, though sometimes unsuccessfully, to avoid some fantasy art clichés, like the bountifully-boobed warrior chick in iron bra, the buffed-out hunk man, and the overly-bright fantasy color palette with its annoying purples and acidic yellows. I much prefer an earthy palette, unless the illustration really calls for some color craziness."

Of course, one does not go from square one to painting purple hippos without some help along the way. Matt's mother is an artist and an art teacher, and "always made sure we were as comfortable with crayons as we were with our pacifiers." He grew up as a strange yin-yang between gamer and jock; he played physical games like football as well as mental games like **Dungeons & Dragons**. The balance between the two different worlds may seem a bit difficult to manage, but Matt fully embraces it. "I have never fit 100% into any of my 'scenes.' I am used to it. It must have something to do with the fact that my interests were not bought in a standard package. I am a gamer nerd, football meathead, artsy-fartsy, baseball nut, metal-head, easy-listening fan all at the same time." Matt began to focus more on art in high school, and even attended a three-hour commercial art class taught by his own mother. He attended the Columbus College of Art and Design, and decided to focus on painting and illustration after flirting with the idea of getting into advertising.

Higher education and growing up as the son of an artist is certainly helpful, but Matt has a special trait that makes him especially effective as a **Magic** artist: he's a gamer just like you. "I guess the true coolness of it is that gaming is my favorite hobby, and the art I do is related to my favorite stuff. Not only is it fun, but I really believe it makes me a better artist. I care about the games I work on, so I apply a little extra elbow grease. Also, I have a historical knowledge of the games I work on so I know what works, what fails, and what the players respond to. It's also fun to play someone and only half

way through the game do they realize they are pummeling me with a card I illustrated." Games also have a link to fantasy art, which Matt enjoys to produce. "Fantasy art reigns over other 'art' in one aspect -- its complete existence within the realm of imagination. I like the fantasy art that is only tenuously rooted in reality, with a strong dose of creativity and wackiness. I try to avoid using photo references for anything because they tend to suck the illustration back into the real world. Only in extreme cases where I am completely dumbfounded by a body pose or something will I bust out the camera."

Matt began playing **Magic** back when *The Dark* was released, long before he started doing art for the game. Playing the game and being an artist gave him an itch to combine these interests. "Without getting too specific about it, I will say that I did feel like I could hack at least as well as some of the artists that were scratching back then. At that point, however, all of my work was either black and white or not fantasy-related at all. I spent a couple years honing my chops on *L5R [Legend of the Five Rings]*, *Mythos*, and some other games." After submitting many samples over the years, Matt finally got the call to start work on *Mercadian Masques*, which would be the first set to feature his art. Ironically enough, he got the call on his birthday. Needless to say, receiving an offer to do art on a game you've played for years has to be an exceptional birthday present. Since then, he's been doing art for **Magic** expansions on a consistent basis. It has made him a little something more than your average gamer, but he still tries to be one of the guys. "I am down at the local card shop with the boys as often as I can be, which is not nearly as often as I would like. They're cool about it and hang with me as just Matt the other nerdy player, though at the beginning they were all coming at me armed with Sharpies. I was happy to sign their cards, then beat them down in the tourney."

### *Some artists paint themselves into their card art. Matt prefers Photoshop.*

And what about playing the game? Does Matt have a particular approach to **Magic**? "There are a few things I like in particular. As an artist I appreciate the opportunity for creativity and personal touch that the game provides. Chess? Blah. Your guys are the same as mine, every time. I also like the way I can play with my buds for fun or play a PTQ and feed my competitive hunger. That is very important to me. I cannot play racquetball, or football, or volleyball for fun anymore; it's on or I'm out. **Magic** is flexible enough to accommodate both the inner child and the competitive man. Lastly, and probably mostly, I like the social aspect of it. Video games do not appeal to me at all. They're cool for a diversion from time to time, but playing a person, jawing back and forth, *mano to mano* is much better than twiddling a plastic stick staring at my computer monitor."

Just like many players, Matt has played in Pro Tour Qualifiers, hoping to earn a spot in the most prestigious **Magic** tournament circuit in the world. "I used to be more serious than I am because I used to have the time to be. I have a zombie deck, so that makes me casual, but my favorite **Magic** happens at the all-day tourneys, PTQ's and the like. I usually beat up on the kids at the local shop, but they have been getting better while I have been going nowhere. I did have one day in the sun a few years back: at an *Urza's Saga* sealed PTQ, I went 6-1-1, made Top 8, then drafted the much-maligned red and made it to the finals -- only to be beaten by a PT regular, John Marks. So close, but yet so far. It's all gone south from there." Even though he does have a competitive streak, Matt prefers to use his own decks instead of copying ones from the Internet. "I play with all sorts of decks, aggressive, control, combo, wacky, theme, etc. - but all with one common thread; they have to be 100% all Matt. I will NEVER play a deck from the 'net, nor will I keep constructed a deck I made

only to see that similar ones have cropped up on the 'net or at the local shop. With thousands of cards available, why would I want to tote the same ones Timmy does? Lately I have been working on a deck that exploits a Plagiarize/Teferi's Puzzle Box combo. I can't get it to work often enough, so it will likely never see any action."

The process of creating art for **Magic** was fairly simple when the game was still in its infancy. Artists were told the name of the card, and had nothing else to work with. Now, there are intricate storylines, character traits, and specific guidelines to follow. For example, there's a certain way a cephalid has to be painted, otherwise every artist would create their cephalids a different way, and the Vandal, Looter, and Broker wouldn't look alike at all. Let's take a look at three pieces Matt has done, the descriptions that were provided, and how he feels about the finished product.

### Questing Phelddagrif

Art description: "Location: A clear lake in a forest clearing. A massive, full-grown purple hippo with feathered wings aggressively launches itself out of the water, into the sky. The hippo should have huge tusks jutting out from her lower jaw. Make it as intimidating as possible (i.e., not silly or cartoonish)."



This updated version of the big, menacing hippo presented a challenge, because there already was a Phelddagrif card in *Alliances*. The art for the original hippo stood out quite a bit, because it was cartoonish, and almost seemed a bit playful. It is still a solid card, but the art isn't exactly the stuff that intimidates opponents into submission. Questing Phelddagrif is meaner, and as you can tell from the difference in the art, it's definitely a lot more vicious. Matt explains, "I can honestly say my hippo would have been an butt-kicker even if they did not ask me to do it that way, but they did. I think they wanted to make sure they did not get a 'Barney' card." Painting a purple hippopotamus is also a bit of a strange challenge for an artist, but Matt managed to make the best out of the situation. "I like the colors. I messed around with color sketches for hours. The thing that kept giving me fits was the fact that I had to make the hippo purple. In the end, it turned out to be a blessing because it forced me to think of a new palette I had never used before."

As a **Magic** player, Matt prefers the old Phelddagrif's abilities, but it's safe to say he's happier with his interpretation of the creature. "I actually like the old Phelddagrif's mechanics more. It's much harder to kill, and the return to the hand ability is mighty. The new one really packs a punch though. I think the art shows this added pop." One of the guidelines was to use green, blue and white in the art to reflect the creature's colors, but Matt felt this would make the creature seem too soft. Instead, he took a different approach which kept the flavor of the card intact, while not risking the loss of the creature's ferocious image. "I made sure to show trees, water, and sky to go with the green, blue, and white colors. This was important because I was not going to make the illustration green, blue, white, and purple. That would have been too 'Romper Room.'"

## **Thornscape Battlemage**

Art description: "Location: Keld battlefield. A female Skyshroud Elf rides a Colos beast over a Phyrexian. The Elf should have both the red coalition symbol and the white coalition symbol on her armor or clothing."



This creature is interesting, because it's one in a cycle of five from *Planeshift*. Each color got its own Battlemage with allied colors providing different abilities, so there's a good mix of color scheme between all five. It's also interesting to see how each artist interpreted his particular Battlemage. As you can tell from the guidelines provided, there were a lot of different types of creature races that Matt had to include in the art. This presents a bit of a challenge because the card art itself becomes smaller once it's put onto a card, which can make it hard to squeeze all those elements into one piece. "Sometimes the descriptions have tunnel vision. They ask for stuff forgetting that it all has to fit in a two-inch box. In the case of the Battlemage, I chose to whittle out the elements that would take the focus off of the Battlemage herself. She's already a little elf on a huge cow, so adding in a Phyrexian and some scenery would have reduced her to a speck. I think the art descriptions are there to tell you what not to do as much as what to do. I don't think they really cared to see the Keld battlefield as long as I did not show the Battlemage riding around Urza's Tower."

He still did manage to get most of the requested elements into the art. Where's the Phyrexian? "About 20 feet behind the Colos, flat and smoldering on the ground." As far as the Coalition symbols go, Matt decided to take a different approach, and put them on the staff instead of on the clothing. "I wanted to do something cooler, something that said 'Battle'mage more than just a rodeo elf. The battlestaff seemed to fit the bill well." Matt is happy with the finished product, especially since it reflects his desire to avoid fantasy art clichés. "This one could have easily been a dude shooting a red ray at a creature and a white ray at some item the dude was holding. That would have been a more accurate depiction of the card, but horrible horrible, art. There are far too many rays in **Magic** art. There was

supposed to be a ray in Extract, but I decided to take a chance and send in something completely different with hopes that they would bite on the new idea. As you may well know, there is no ray shooting anyone in the head on Extract. You're welcome."

## Dwarven Shrine

Art description: "This is a red card that should show a memorial or trophy case to the school of red magic. Lots of flames coming from different kinds and sizes of vessels, etc."



The quality of a card's art doesn't always reflect the power of the card itself. As a result, many cards with interesting and innovative art are not given much attention, because they never see much play. A perfect example of such a card is Dwarven Shrine. Check out the art; it's got references to plenty of classic red cards. Fireball, Shivan Dragon, Ball Lightning, Hammer of Bogardan, Chaos Charm and others are all either pictured or hinted at. The description sent to Matt didn't ask for past cards to be included. However, since he's been playing the game for quite some time now, he was able to draw on his experiences as a player and use it to enrich the art with a historical flavor. "The description asked for red items and artifacts that might be displayed in a museum or shrine. I decided to flex a little **Magic** history muscle in the art. I thought about cards that had items related to them, like the Chaos Charm and the Hammer. I wanted to include some red icons as well, like Ball Lightning and Shivan Dragon. Obviously I could not include the whole dragon, so I settled for the claw (the item shown up front.) I decided to showcase the dragon claw so the art didn't focus on art that

we've already seen." Why take this unique approach? "I thought the long-time players would think it was cool. I don't think I could have done this at all if I were not a player."

Unfortunately, most players won't even realize the old school flavor of the card, because it rarely gets played, or even looked at for more than a few seconds. As an artist, it's obviously frustrating to produce art for a card that can end up being overlooked. "It happens all the time. Quicksilver Wall is one of my favorite pieces, but that card is twice as bad as the Shrine. I could make a Shrine deck that would work -- probably badly, but it would work. Quicksilver Wall is absolutely worthless. Bad rares are hardly ever looked at, and some of them have damn cool art."

Matt did only two pieces for *Judgment*, the next **Magic** expansion, but also spent more time than usual making them. He will be at Pro Tour - Nice and GenCon, where you can get him to sign your cards with his unique signature. He puts a black square on the card with a thick Sharpie marker, and then signs over it with a silver pen. "The first bunch of cards I signed were not like that. When my pal asked me to sign a foil Scandalmonger, I could not figure out if black Sharpie or silver paint pen would work best, so I decided to use both. People often look on as if I am playing some sort of joke when I start stabbing their cards with a humungous black marker. Most people dig it, though I've had a couple dudes look upset when the black went over the text of the card."

Matt lives in Cleveland, Ohio with his wife Kylie, who "puts up with the 'Dr. Jockyl and Mr. Nerd' transformation, and that's no small feat." In addition to **Magic: The Gathering**, his art has also been featured in **Dungeons & Dragons**, *Vampire: the Eternal Struggle*, *Mythos*, *L5R*, *GURPS*, *Legend of the Burning Sands*, *Wheel of Time*, *7th Sea*, *Warlord* and *RIFTS*. Matt also does freelance toy design, graphic design, web programming and album covers.

You can buy prints, original art and other goodies, as well as learn more about the card art he's done and the process involved in creating them at [www.cavotta.com](http://www.cavotta.com).

### Matt Cavotta Card Gallery

(Click each cardname to view)

Crypt Rats	<i>7th Edition</i>	Noble Panther	<i>Invasion</i>
Fighting Drake	<i>7th Edition</i>	Phyrexian Lens	<i>Invasion</i>
Goblin Spelunkers	<i>7th Edition</i>	Stand or Fall	<i>Invasion</i>
Hibernation	<i>7th Edition</i>	Treefolk Healer	<i>Invasion</i>
Inspiration	<i>7th Edition</i>	Alpha Kavu	<i>Planeshift</i>
Plague Beetle	<i>7th Edition</i>	Dark Suspicions	<i>Planeshift</i>
Scavenger Folk	<i>7th Edition</i>	Questing Phelddagrif	<i>Planeshift</i>
Muzzle	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Thornscape Battlemage	<i>Planeshift</i>
Ramosian Sky Marshal	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Anavolver	<i>Apocalypse</i>
Scandalmonger	<i>Mercadian</i>	Ebony Treefolk	<i>Apocalypse</i>

	<i>Masques</i>		
Subterranean Hangar	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Jaded Response	<i>Apocalypse</i>
Trade Routes	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Tundra Kavu	<i>Apocalypse</i>
Lawbringer	<i>Nemesis</i>	Dwarven Shrine	<i>Odyssey</i>
Mossgod	<i>Nemesis</i>	Extract	<i>Odyssey</i>
Netter en-Dal	<i>Nemesis</i>	Frightcrawler	<i>Odyssey</i>
Saproling Cluster	<i>Nemesis</i>	Iridescent Angel	<i>Odyssey</i>
Spiritual Asylum	<i>Nemesis</i>	Mystic Visionary	<i>Odyssey</i>
Pygmy Razorback	<i>Prophecy</i>	Shower of Coals	<i>Odyssey</i>
Quicksilver Wall	<i>Prophecy</i>	Still Life	<i>Odyssey</i>
Rethink	<i>Prophecy</i>	Volcanic Spray	<i>Odyssey</i>
Canopy Surge	<i>Invasion</i>	Nantuko Blightcutter	<i>Torment</i>
Empress Galina	<i>Invasion</i>	Parallel Evolution	<i>Torment</i>
Maniacal Rage	<i>Invasion</i>	Skywing Aven	<i>Torment</i>
Mountain	<i>Invasion</i>	Stern Judge	<i>Torment</i>

The author, Toby Wachter, has been playing **Magic** since he was 13 years old. Since then he's been through various phases with the game, going from the kid who buys a few packs hoping to open a Royal Assassin, to a Junior Super Series player, to an occasional Pro Tour player. Over the past few years he's dedicated myself more to the media aspects of the game, writing for [Sideboard's](#) website and magazine, and doing event coverage at **Magic** tournaments when it doesn't interfere with his studies at college. Comments? Email [editor@wizards.com](mailto:editor@wizards.com).