

Marking cards... the fun and legal way Customizing Your Collection

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"Death by Orcish Pummel."

Last Thursday, I found, hiding in a battered white longbox in my basement, a *Fallen Empires* [Orcish Captain](#) with those words written on it. "Death by Orcish Pummel," it said, "Kobolds will have revenge." Beneath that was the signature of my brother. My collection of **Magic** cards has not been properly organized since the week before the *Weatherlight* prerelease -- five years, fifteen expansions, and four apartments ago. But in the past few weeks I have been doing my best to rectify that situation, spending long hours sifting through box after box of deck fragments, stashed commons, and basic lands. It can be a task, as the cards tend to blend together after long stretches of taxonomy. The *Apocalypse* expansion symbol starts looking like the *Mercadian Masques* symbol. I can't remember the rarity of the *Ice Age* [Soul Barrier](#). I become disoriented by Drew Tucker artwork.

But every so often I'd come across a little nugget like that [Orcish Captain](#)... something that, to me, set my collection apart from those of the thousands of other pack-rat **Magic** players. Sometimes I'd find something elegant, like an Asian [Elvish Lyrist](#) signed by artist Rebecca Guay, or I'd find something silly like a *Revised* [Prodigal Sorcerer](#) with a picture of Reggie Miller (of the Indiana Pacers) glued on it. Don't ask. But it was those cards -- not any number of *Legends* rares or [dual lands](#) or foil [Ball Lightnings](#) -- that made me really appreciate the value of my mammoth collection of **Magic** cards. And I don't mean value in a monetary sense, but value to me as a person.

To some people, cards are synonymous with money and have little or no personal value. I played with a guy in Pittsburgh that didn't want a [Ghitu Fire](#) as part of his draft winnings because it was "played"; he needed everything in mint condition in case he felt like selling them all at the drop of a hat. I'm just the opposite. Once I started collecting **Magic** years ago, I had the feeling that I'd be keeping the cards forever. I never even touched a card sleeve for the first two years I played; consequently many of my cards that predate *Tempest* look like I sanded floors with them.

So it should be obvious that I have no problem with people signing, writing on, drawing on, or otherwise "embellishing" my cards. Actually, I encourage it, because it is such embellishments that



give my collection that little extra something in my eyes; something that usually makes me pause, remember, and laugh about a memorable match, a past tournament or convention, or an old friend.

Below I have broken down the three most popular ways to have your cards embellished: artists, celebrities, and battle scars.

ARTISTS

When most people hear the term "signed cards," they think of the card's illustrator; this is the most popular and "accepted" form of embellishment. Most **Magic** artists enjoy going to tournaments and conventions, and will often sit at booths for hours talking with fans, showing off their portfolios, selling prints and proofs, and yes, signing cards. I can remember the first card I ever had signed by an artist -- a [Millstone](#) by Kaja Foglio at a Pittsburgh ComiCon. I also paid three dollars at a booth run by the show organizers for a little certificate verifying Kaja's signature as authentic, a precaution I now feel is unnecessary. We're not talking about Derek Jeter here.

Artists' signatures predate foils as the "cool" way to make your deck more impressive; many players strive to get "all-signed" decks, and some people will even play with worse cards just because the better cards aren't signed. My collection of signed cards is relatively random, made up of whatever I had on me when I realized the artist was present. It is perfectly acceptable, however, to prepare a small stack of cards to be signed if you know a particular artist will be at a tournament or show you plan to attend.

Just from perusing the [Sideboard Online](#), I found out that Edward Beard, Jr. will be at [Grand Prix - Nagoya](#), Tom Gianni and Jeff Miracola will be attending [Grand Prix - Milwaukee](#), and [four artists](#) -- Heather Hudson, Matt Cavotta, David Martin, and Ron Spencer -- will be guests at Pro Tour - Nice. Several local Tournament Organizers, such as Professional Events Services, often arrange for artists to appear at smaller venues such as prereleases and State Championships. Be sure to check with your local TO to see if any such appearances are scheduled in your area.

With a little Internet savvy, you can also find homepages for individual artists; these sometimes contain information on how to send cards to the artist to sign by mail. (Wizards of the Coast makes no guarantees regarding success with this method.) I don't have a current official list of websites, but here's [an older one](#) for starters. **Magic** artist Randy Gallegos has written an excellent "protocol" guide for corresponding with artists -- both through the mail and in person -- [here](#). It is definitely recommended reading if you want to start getting cards signed.



Hypnotic Specter signed by Douglas Shuler, Morphling signed by rk post, Nicol Bolas signed by Edward Beard, Jr., Phyrexian Scuta signed by Scott M. Fischer, Swords to Plowshares signed by Jeff A. Menges.

CELEBRITIES

People can often be seen waving gloves, balls, and photographs from the first few rows of bleachers during batting practice at Major League baseball games, all with the hopes of getting an autograph. Hero worship? Maybe. Fun and exciting? Sure is.

Whether or not you choose to acknowledge it, **Magic** has its own brand of celebrities. Thanks to the Internet, the top players and deckbuilders from the Pro Tour are "household names" to members of the game's community. These guys all enjoy their fame, and most will gladly sign cards when asked.

Some players have cards directly linked to them. Darwin Kastle has signed thousands of [Avalanche Riders](#), the card he designed as a winner of the Duelist Invitational, and I'm sure he'd sign yours as well. (Other cards designed by Invitational Winners are: [Rootwater Thief](#) by Mike Long, [Meddling Mage](#) by Chris Pikula, and [Shadowmage Infiltrator](#) by Jon Finkel. Olle Rade's card will appear in *Judgment*.) Other players have cards associated with them simply because they "popularized" them in high-profile tournaments -- Kai Budde was linked (for a while) to [Covetous Dragon](#) because it was the big hitter in his World Champion deck, and Dave Price's Pro Tour victory with [Jackal Pup](#) makes him that card's life partner as well.

But really, most players will sign any card if you ask them, and they'll enjoy the flattery. So don't be bashful the next time you see one of your **Magic** heroes at a local tournament, Grand Prix, or high-level event.



Rith signed by Brian "Dragon Master" Kibler, random bad cards signed by Jon Finkel and Kai Budde, a Chris Pikula Meddling Mage, and a Planar Overlay signed by Internet cult of personality John Friggin' Rizzo.

BATTLE SCARS

This style of embellishment is probably the most fun and the easiest to do. Face it; anyone can get Kev Walker to sign a [Sengir Vampire](#). Anyone can ask PT Osaka Champion Ken Ho to sign a [Tarnished Citadel](#) (I'll have to remember to do that). But when you have a deck that you carry around that gets altered or autographed on a regular basis, you truly have a one-of-a-kind creation.

Sometimes it can be something simple, like having everyone you play against sign a card. Other times, your deck is like a big bulletin board with all sorts of drawings, messages, and other nonsense throughout. Most avid players of the 5-Color format (www.5-color.com) engage in such revelry. I have seen cards in these guys' decks with just about every kind of ornamentation imaginable. Some of the

players sign -- or write messages on -- cards they lose in ante, which often then end up in the other guy's deck. Some of them keep track of how often things happen; a [Force Void](#) might have a series of tick marks indicating the number of spells it has countered over its lifespan. Some of them alter the card art in tribute (or subtle insult) to their friends. And some of them decorate their cards just for intimidation -- or maybe it's for laughs. But in general, I have never seen a population of players have more fun with **Magic** than the 5-Color crowd, and I'm sure their flippant attitudes with their cards' "health" in general adds to the mirth (in addition to heavy adornment, there are no sleeves allowed, even for the "Power 9" and other expensive goodies).

My own first "battle scars" deck was an Orc deck that I played when I was in college. It was a casual mono-red deck full of Orcs and a few burn spells, and it performed decently. The hook was that anyone I beat with the deck had to sign a card, and most people took it a step further and wrote me a funny little note. As I dug up all the cards to this deck (including the [Orcish Captain](#) signed by my brother), it took me back to those fun days and reminded me of all the guys I used to play with. Quite a keepsake.



The Orcs' Victim Gallery: Orcish Captain, Orcish Conscripts, Orcish Librarian, Brassclaw Orcs, and Orcish Farmer.

THE CAVEATS

It is unclear if getting artists -- or famous players -- to sign your cards helps or hurts their value on the secondary market, so don't expect some kind of huge increase in a card's worth once it is signed. Some players and collectors like that kind of stuff, and some think it ruins the card. My general rule is if I get it signed, I just keep it for myself. That way I don't need to worry what it's worth to someone else.

What about altered cards' legality in tournament play? I had a talk with the DCI's Chris Zantides about this issue, and the message I got from him was that it would always be the head judge's call as to whether a card is "disruptively" altered. Cards with just signature on them are almost universally acceptable; the fuzziness starts when the whole text box is covered or if the art is obscured too much. Even if the card name is readable, altered cards can be ruled illegal if they seem deceptive to your opponent from a distance. If the card isn't immediately recognizable, it shouldn't be allowed.

The [Orcish Librarian](#) above is a definite no-no for tournament play, and the other four Orc cards are all debatable; their legality would depend on the judge.

If you want to be perfectly safe, don't use heavily altered cards in tournaments, or at least show the judge ahead of time to get his opinion.

Additionally, profane messages and images on cards are not only illegal in tournaments, but are generally considered bad form in mixed company.

BUST OUT THE MARKERS

Lastly, whenever customizing, keep the ballpoint pens away from your cards. They leave impressions that are visible through the backs of the cards. Stick to felt-tip pens and Magic Markers.

So there you have it. If you want to make your collection even more "yours," if you want to preserve memories within the cards themselves, if you want to customize your deck in ways you never thought of... go to it! There are artists and players and friends out there that will be glad to put their mark on a **Magic** card for you, and you can do it for them in turn. Come up with your own unique way to personalize your cards; it will only add to your enjoyment of the game. If you have any unique ideas, stick them on the [message boards](#).

In closing, I want to show a few more prizes I've collected over the past several years...



The first is from Richard Garfield (always willing to sign cards for fans) whom I first met at Worlds 2000. Little did I know I'd be working in the same building with him! The [Coalition Victory](#) was a prize from Anthony Alongi for "breaking" said card in one of his [Star City contests](#). The last three are cards I had signed at Pro Tour - Rome three-and-a-half years ago. The first is by Mark Rosewater, the second by then-player Randy Buehler, and the third was by another competitor... some scalawag named Ben Bleiweiss (It reads, "I hate Rome I hate life I hate myself Ben Bleiweiss 'Poker Face.'" Not a good tournament for Ben.). Life is funny; I was asking for autographs then, and now I have them all pressed into service writing about stuff like creature enchantments! Haha!

I'm sure Jay Moldenhauer-Salazar feels left out, and he should! I'll get his John Hancock one day, you can count on it.

Until then,

Aaron Forsythe, "Enhancer" of Cards

Footnote: If anyone is wondering, many of the white-bordered cards shown above ([Goblin Mutant](#), [Giant Spider](#), [Knight of Stromgald](#), and [Goblin Warrens](#)), plus the Pegasus token, are from a boxed set called [Anthologies](#) that was put out in late 1998.

Questions or comments on this article or the site in general? Hit me at editor@wizards.com.

