

One prolific and talented lady

Behind the Canvas: Terese Nielsen

Toby Wachter

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- [Toby Wachter Archive](#)

This month's artist is best known as the creator of the images you see as you get wrecked by two of blue's most powerful spells: Force of Will and Fact or Fiction. Many anti-blue mages have nightmares about those two cards, and are all too familiar with Terese Nielsen's art, which is often accompanied by a spell being countered for free or a headache-inducing card split. On the other hand, if you are one of those blue mages, Terese's art has to be one of the most comforting things in the world.

Born in the rural town of Aurora, Nebraska, Terese lived in an area with no other families around, and as a result, spent her childhood without other kids nearby. This gave Terese, and her brother Ron Spencer (who would go on to do **Magic** art himself) lots of time to dedicate to art. "Because we lived out in the boonies I spent less time hanging out with friends than most of the kids that lived in town so that gave me more time to spend doing art. That fact, coupled with being isolated 'with' my brother Ron and his twisted mind, probably had the greatest effect on my personality."

Terese has fond memories of growing up with her brother and his creative mind. "He was a continual stream of ideas. I was always amazed at the vast array of creativity that was constantly oozing out of him. He was also extremely funny which was particularly handy during the long boring hours of church. He kept our family (and several others in the pews in front and behind us) in stitches with his witty cartoons and caricatures." That creativity helped him become a great artist, but there was no competitive sibling rivalry, as Ron was always eager to help his younger sister out. "When I was very young up to about junior high I was jealous of his endless flow of ideas. I was never really jealous though because he was so helpful and interested in what I did. He was never one to rub his skill level in my face. He always encouraged and assisted me."

Terese was interested in psychology from an early age, but decided to pursue art instead. "My biggest interest and curiosity was how the brain works. I was into psychology, dreams, physiology, and how the body and psyche work together. But at that time I wasn't aware of fields that studied the mind and body in a more holistic and metaphysical way so I decided to pursue art instead. It was something I enjoyed and seemed relatively good at compared to most kids." She attended a two-year school for three years, receiving an associates degree in arts and science and then went on to Art Center College of Design to receive a bachelors degree in fine arts.

So with plenty of experience and education under her belt, how does Terese describe her style? "It's always harder describing my own work than someone else's style because I am so close to it that I

think it's hard to see it with a fresh eye. I've been told my work has an ethereal, fluid, musical flow to it. I enjoy capturing personalities in characters, so most often my interest and the detail goes into the figurative areas. The surrounding parts of a painting are sometimes purposefully less defined or I'll use a more textural approach instead of rendering out every leaf or cloud." Fantasy art is a great outlet for Terese, because it lets her incorporate these elements into her work. "[Fantasy art] allows me to put a whole lot more of myself into a piece. If I'm painting tomatoes for a label on a bottle of ketchup or specific characters for a movie I have very little creative freedom from the actual design of it to the use of color. I'm told exactly what is needed and what to do. Fantasy art also feeds the part in everyone that enjoys **Magic**: things unseen and mysteries yet to be solved."

She enjoys doing **Magic** art, although she has noticed some changes in the guidelines over the years. "In the beginning doing **Magic** art was some of my favorite work. Now the descriptions are so tight that it takes away much of the freedom that was there in the beginning. It continues to be fun seeing what kind of crazy thing I'm going to be asked to depict next." *[Editor's Note: Brady Dommermuth, **Magic** creative director, and Jeremy Cranford and Dana Knutson, the **Magic** art directors, are already working on ways to put more control back into the hands of illustrators.]* Actually playing the game is something that Terese still hasn't quite grasped yet. "I've watched it played several times but have only tried my hand at it a couple times which definitely isn't enough times to understand it. My son Lars (9) is pretty into it now so I keep telling him to learn how to play it and teach me how."

Terese started working on **Magic** during *Alliances* in 1995, and interestingly enough, Force of Will was the first piece she did for the game. Since then she's done over a hundred cards, but has a hard time deciding which piece she likes best. "I tend to like the ones that are beautiful and less gruesome. I like Moon Sprite (from *Portal*), Stream of Life (from *Fifth Edition*), Foresight (the mermaid version), Serra's Embrace (from *Urza's Saga*), Yavimaya Enchantress (from 7th Edition), Gaea's Skyfolk, and Blessed Orator." One of the perks of being a **Magic** artist is that you get to include family and friends in your art, which can certainly make a piece more memorable. "One of my favorite cards to create was Samite Elder [from *Planeshift*] in which I painted all four of our kids in it being protected by their Grandma, the Samite Elder. They love seeing themselves in a **Magic** card and get all excited when people want them to sign the card as well."

Terese's family star in Samite Elder. Images used from TNielsen.com with permission.

Force of Will



Guidelines given to the artists often instruct them to create a piece with a specific color in mind. Force of Will is the exception to this rule, with its bold red and orange tones. The reason for this is that the art for one of the most powerful blue cards ever printed was actually intended for a red card. "This was originally a card called 'Stop Spell.' It was suppose to be red magic, thus the red background and flames. I didn't know until it was printed that the name had been changed to 'Force of Will' and it had become a blue card." [Editor's note: R&D swears Force of Will -- a.k.a. "Stop Spell" -- was always a blue card... They think someone in our art or continuity departments made a mistake and told Terese the wrong color.]

Players have often speculated that the character depicted on Force of Will was inspired by Wolverine of Marvel Comics fame, from the black hair to the claws coming out of his fists. This wasn't exactly Terese's intention. "Well I love Wolverine... he's a cool character. I didn't purposefully go after that, though I know Wolverine has kind of 'cornered the market' on things jutting out from knuckles. I think our Force of Will character would give him a run for his money though, don't you? My thoughts on Force of Will were to make a really 'bad' looking reptilian-like warrior. So he's got wild dreadlocks, reptilian armor, pointy filed teeth, and irises that are shaped like snakes. I don't think all of that comes through on the tiny little card." Terese likes the "primitive anger" attitude that the piece represents. "I think the tough, forceful in your face anger comes across, so the illustration seems successful."

"Tough, forceful, and in your face anger" may not be a good description of blue magic in general, but anyone who has been frustrated after not being able to resolve any cards against a permission player will tell you that it fits the bill for Force of Will perfectly.

Natural Order

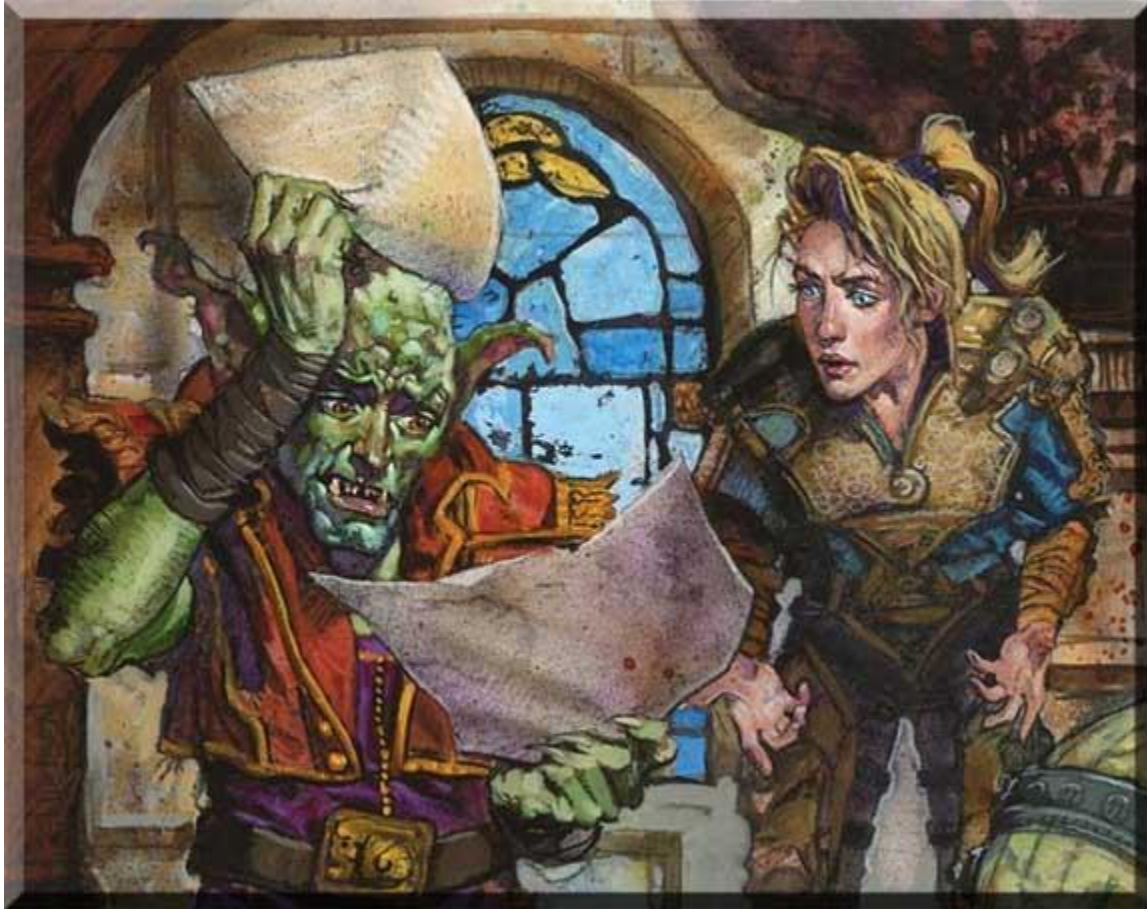


This piece is interesting because it suggests the "natural order" of the strong predator killing the weak prey. Terese took an interesting approach to this by taking attention of the violent nature of the scene, and making the leopard seem nobler. "I wouldn't have wanted to paint a bloody-viciously-mauling scene. I actually felt bad just painting the scene as I did, though I know it's a natural occurrence in nature. I tried to focus more on the nobility and power of the leopard and de-emphasize the sorry little chimp. The monkey fades into the ground and is almost an afterthought. I think it works well for the assignment I was given, though it is not the subject material I would want to look at on my wall every day."

Another interesting aspect of the piece is that the background doesn't really show any trees or branches, except for some vines. Shadows and fog are the dominant element. "I usually start my paintings with a loose water color wash in the background using acrylic. I personally prefer paintings that don't render every last bit of the painting with equal emphasis. I merely wanted to suggest forest and vines without painting all the details, as I spoke about earlier. I think it provides a nice visual contrast/compliment to the focal point which is more tightly rendered."

Fact or Fiction

Art Description: "Location: Weatherlight, Below decks. Squee holds up two pieces of paper with a look of utter confusion on his face (he can't read). Behind him, Hanna gestures impatiently."



Ah, the *Weatherlight* crew. One of the benefits of being a **Magic** artist is that you're given a significant amount of freedom, but painting Gerrard and the rest of his buddies was a much more specific assignment. "That's just part of the job as an illustrator. You try and tell whatever story the client asks you to. Sometimes it's more specific such as 'make this character doing this, and here's a styleguide that shows you exactly what that character looks like'. When **Magic** shifted to a storyline it seemed pretty much imperative to provide the artists with character reference to maintain some type of continuity. I seemed to have a lot of opportunities to paint Gerrard which did get little bit tedious after a while." Regardless, Terese took the assignment in stride and enjoyed doing it. "It was fun to do. I also enjoy painting green skin. If you go on to my [website](#) you can get a laugh seeing the reference photos we shot for it. I posed for Hanna and I didn't stray to far from what I look like. I think it successfully tells the story provided by the description."

Two of Terese's famous renderings of Gerrard: one from the Mercadian Masques card Charisma, and the other from the cover of Duelist Magazine #28.

An interesting part of the piece is that Squee's face is depicted as more human, and less goofy, compared to other interpretations of **Magic's** most famous Goblin. "I guess I'm just not as into the dopey-looking renditions of him. I tried to give him a more realistic feel which I guess ended up looking humanoid." Just like in Force of Will, Terese used strong black and silver lines in specific areas to add emphasis to certain things (black to outline Squee's arm, silver lines on Hanna's armor). This is a part of her style. "I do a tight sketch and Xerox it on to Strathmore paper and then paint on top of that. This gives me a strong black line that sometimes comes through into the final painting. I like using colored pencils for defining shapes and emphasizing certain edges."

Terese lives in Southern California, in a suburb of Los Angeles, with her partner Dawn, and their four children, Heather, Kristi, Lars and Lauren. "I have a very rustic cabin about 20 minutes away that makes up for having to live in the city. I love the weather though I do miss the good Nebraska thunderstorms."

In addition to her work for **Magic**, Terese has done covers, cards, pin-ups and painted comics for many comic companies including Marvel, DC, Topps, Darkhorse, and Image. Her work has also been featured for games such as *Mage Knight*, *Battletech*, *Changling*, *Deadlands*, *7th Sea*, *Vampire*, *Shadowrun*, and *Wheel of Time*, as well as video game covers for 3DO, Sierra Studios, and Mythic Entertainment, in addition to book covers for Wizards of the Coast, Del Rey, Tor, and Random House.

Terese will be at the **Magic** World Championships in Sydney and the San Diego Comicon, which will both take place in August. You can buy artist proofs, prints, original art, and see lots of cool stuff like reference photos for some of your favorite **Magic** art at <http://TNIelsen.com>.

Terese Nielsen Card Gallery

(Click each cardname to view)

Static Orb	<i>7th Edition</i>	Lay Waste	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Wooden Sphere	<i>7th Edition</i>	Disorder	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Giant Growth	<i>7th Edition</i>	Serra's Embrace	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Yavimaya Enchantress	<i>7th Edition</i>	Keeper of the Flame	<i>Exodus</i>
Delusions of Mediocrity	<i>7th Edition</i>	Scalding Salamander	<i>Exodus</i>
Glorious Anthem	<i>7th Edition</i>	Ertai, Wizard Adept	<i>Exodus</i>
Clockwork Steed	<i>Fifth Edition</i>	Wall of Nets	<i>Exodus</i>
Stream of Life	<i>Fifth Edition</i>	Penance	<i>Exodus</i>
Brainwash	<i>Fifth Edition</i>	Revenant	<i>Stronghold</i>
Forest (Guru)	Promo	Provoke	<i>Stronghold</i>
Island (Guru)	Promo	Venerable Monk	<i>Stronghold</i>
Mountain (Guru)	Promo	Hidden Retreat	<i>Stronghold</i>
Plains (Guru)	Promo	Sacred Ground	<i>Stronghold</i>

Swamp (Guru)	Promo	Victual Sliver	<i>Stronghold</i>
Grotesque Hybrid	<i>Torment</i>	Choke	<i>Tempest</i>
Enslaved Dwarf	<i>Torment</i>	Plains	<i>Tempest</i>
Sonic Seizure	<i>Torment</i>	Plains (Version 2)	<i>Tempest</i>
Nimble Mongoose	<i>Odyssey</i>	Plains (Version 3)	<i>Tempest</i>
Obstinate Familiar	<i>Odyssey</i>	Plains (Version 4)	<i>Tempest</i>
Repel	<i>Odyssey</i>	Stun	<i>Tempest</i>
Master Apothecary	<i>Odyssey</i>	Mana Severance	<i>Tempest</i>
Blessed Orator	<i>Odyssey</i>	Unstable Shapeshifter	<i>Tempest</i>
Luminous Guardian	<i>Odyssey</i>	Infernal Tribute	<i>Weatherlight</i>
Suppress	<i>Apocalypse</i>	Bogardan Firefiend	<i>Weatherlight</i>
Jilt	<i>Apocalypse</i>	Heart of Bogardan	<i>Weatherlight</i>
Gaea's Skyfolk	<i>Apocalypse</i>	Aku Djinn	<i>Visions</i>
Sinister Strength	<i>Planeshift</i>	Pillar Tombs of Aku	<i>Visions</i>
Heroic Defiance	<i>Planeshift</i>	King Cheetah	<i>Visions</i>
Samite Elder	<i>Planeshift</i>	Natural Order	<i>Visions</i>
Mourning	<i>Invasion</i>	Undo	<i>Visions</i>
Island	<i>Invasion</i>	Guiding Spirit	<i>Visions</i>
Kavu Monarch	<i>Invasion</i>	Mundungu	<i>Visions</i>
Fact or Fiction	<i>Invasion</i>	Zombie Mob	<i>Mirage</i>
Barrin's Spite	<i>Invasion</i>	Stalking Tiger	<i>Mirage</i>
Heroes' Reunion	<i>Invasion</i>	Bad River	<i>Mirage</i>
Voracious Cobra	<i>Invasion</i>	Divine Offering	<i>Mirage</i>
Rhystic Study	<i>Prophecy</i>	Ethereal Champion	<i>Mirage</i>
Excavation	<i>Prophecy</i>	Delirium	<i>Mirage</i>
Troubled Healer	<i>Prophecy</i>	Sealed Fate	<i>Mirage</i>
Arc Mage	<i>Nemesis</i>	Elvish Ranger	<i>Alliances</i>
Stronghold Biologist	<i>Nemesis</i>	Elvish Ranger (Version 2)	<i>Alliances</i>
Stronghold Machinist	<i>Nemesis</i>	Foresight	<i>Alliances</i>
Intimidation	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Foresight (Version 2)	<i>Alliances</i>
Rushwood Herbalist	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Force of Will	<i>Alliances</i>

Ley Line	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Energy Arc	<i>Alliances</i>
Mercadian Bazaar	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Nature's Lore	<i>Portal</i>
Diplomatic Immunity	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Moon Sprite	<i>Portal</i>
Charisma	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Raging Cougar	<i>Portal</i>
Saprazzan Heir	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Spiritual Guardian	<i>Portal</i>
Honor the Fallen	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Organ Harvest	<i>Unglued</i>
Unnerve	<i>Urza's Saga</i>	Team Spirit	<i>Unglued</i>
Lull	<i>Urza's Saga</i>	Forest	<i>Unglued</i>
Wild Dogs	<i>Urza's Saga</i>	Once More with Feeling	<i>Unglued</i>

Questions? Comments? Write to editor@wizards.com.