

A true industry insider

Behind the Canvas: Matt Wilson

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For most **Magic** artists, the process of making art for the game is often done from an outsider's perspective. Assignments come in with descriptions, and it is the artist's job to interpret them, add his or her own flair, and ship the pieces off to Renton. Where they will eventually be placed on the cards you play with. In some cases, however, the artist has an active role in the creative process at Wizards of the Coast, which can help provide a unique perspective on the characters and creatures depicted on the art. An example of such an artist is Matt Wilson. As both an art director and concept illustrator, Matt has been involved with various aspects of the game's visual side. As an artist, he has created many memorable pieces such as Reya Dawnbringer and Kris Mage.

Like most artists, Matt started his craft at a very young age. When the first *Star Wars* movie (*A New Hope*) came out in 1977, it captivated his imagination and provided inspiration in more ways than one. "Like just about everyone in this field, I've been drawing since I was a pup. For the first ten years, it was almost exclusively *Star Wars* battle scenes, with the occasional castle siege thrown in for variety. Early drawings were also a sort of multimedia experience as well, as I unconsciously incorporated a full track of sound effects as I scribbled away -- a habit that drew some negative attention during story time in my classes." Eventually, this *Star Wars* obsession suggested a different career path to Matt, but his talents redirected his efforts. "Up until I was fourteen, I had wanted to be an astronaut. Mostly because I wanted to fly an X-wing, but I went to Space Camp and studied space stuff like crazy until I got into high school. But around high school, I realized there was a great deal of work that I wasn't interested in doing anymore, and that something like say, drawing, didn't require too much math. I hadn't really ever thought I could make a living doing artwork until then, but once the light clicked on, I knew I would have to pursue an illustration direction in my life."

Unlike many artists, Matt is mostly self-taught and did not get much out of art school. "I made it through about a year and a half of a state college. It helped me realize that it wasn't really going to help me. I couldn't afford real art school, and the Cal State schools had you stuck in more general education classes than art classes, so I bailed and spent my tuition on a bunch of art books that I studied until the pages were black with graphite fingerprints. It was mostly just anatomy stuff, but I spent more time on my own studying than I ever did in school."

He was drawn into fantasy art by the creative freedom it offers. "I like that it's not real. It sounds obvious, but that's really what it comes down to. For me, doing artwork is a way to realize what's bouncing around in my head... my imagination. I'd rather run a rusty cheese grater over my forehead than paint a beer poster or an insurance ad or some realistic scene that doesn't demand creativity. I'm not all about self statement and other 'artsy' values like that, but I do need to be creative with my artwork, and fantasy is just about the best place you can do that." He particularly likes doing **Magic** art because it often strays from the typical "dragons and wizards" definition of fantasy gaming.

"**Magic** has a lot of room for experimentation and exploration in new designs. Because it deliberately tries to break free of what is labeled as 'traditional fantasy', you get to see a lot of new territory, instead of the same medieval sorts of scenes that might be more common in other product settings."

Matt's introduction to **Magic** art was a bit different than most. He was actually hired to be the art director for the game, but also contributed pieces just as any freelancer might. The advantage was that as art director, Matt understood the assignments perfectly. "Technically, my first illustration was for one of the oversized *Vanguard* cards, but the first real card set I did work for was *Tempest*. How I got the job is the funny part -- I was actually hired to art direct **Magic**, and in doing so, was allowed and expected to contribute artwork to the set. So by day, I was a full time art director for the card set, and by night, I freelanced for myself full time. It made communication with the art director easy though." Unfortunately, art direction wasn't something Matt enjoyed. He wanted to do more art and less management, so he took an offer with FASA Corporation to be a staff illustrator. Once things at that company started to look bad, Matt was given another opportunity to work for Wizards -- this time, as the lead concept illustrator.

As a part of his current job, Matt designs and illustrates many creatures and characters that inhabit the world depicted on **Magic** cards. This is very important, because it involves creating the style guide for other artists so that everyone will draw Kamahl, a Cabal Minion, or the Cabal Patriarch himself within a certain set of guidelines, which helps shape continuity. This work is ultimately more fulfilling for Matt. The art director job involved artist management, which he did not enjoy and says "is now far in the past, and never to be done again." In contrast, his current position as lead concept illustrator utilizes his creative talents much better. "Basically, the art director picks the artists that will do the artwork for a set. He delegates their art descriptions, and then guides them through the art process to ensure that the final illustration is what the project wants, a la a film director's relationship with actors. As a concept illustrator, I don't do any management or delegation or interact with contractors. I sit at my desk and computer and draw monsters and characters all day to try and meet requirements set forth by the team that controls the project. Having had extensive art direction experience (I art directed *Legend of the Five Rings* for two years before **Magic**), I have a good working knowledge of both sides of the production process."

So how does an idea come from the mind of a designer like Mark Rosewater, and onto Matt Wilson's canvas? "In the past, the process has been that the R&D department creates card mechanics and some rough ideas for creatures that fit those mechanics. Then, a description of the mechanic and the idea are given to the concept artist who presents visual ideas for the creatures. Those are then evaluated by R&D to determine whether or not they meet the requirements and are then assimilated or revised accordingly." One of the biggest problems presented by Matt's job is finding a balance between creativity and viability. "The biggest challenge is often trying to come up with something that looks cool but still fits the requirements of the mechanics or the concepts that R&D has put forth for the creatures. The descriptions are not written from a visual point of view, so sometimes what sounds

good in a meeting doesn't come out so well as a picture." Still, the finished product is something that often makes Matt happy. "I think Kamahl came off pretty well, and I like the Mindslicer design. I recently did an angel design as well that I think is going to go over pretty well, but you won't see her for a while. I spent most of last year working on an updated look for the **Magic** creatures, but you probably won't see any of those designs until a future edition of **Magic**." Although Matt's guidelines give artists boundaries to work within, he does not believe they are detrimental to each artist's creative process. "Since *Tempest* was the first set I worked on, I came in working with the style guides. Since then, **Magic** has always made use of thorough style guides in their sets. What was it like? Well, it was like working on any other property that has preexisting characters and settings. It'd be like doing work for *Star Wars* -- you have to make it look like the stuff in *Star Wars* or its not going to go together with the other material. People seem to have an aversion to 'style guides,' thinking that they stifle the creativity of the artists, but that's what an illustrator's life is all about. He's a hired gun. Style guides are just part of the routine."

Matt has a hard time singling out one of his **Magic** pieces as his favorite, but one he really likes is everyone's favorite murderous bunny. "Kezzerdrix in *Tempest* is one of my favorites because it was all me. The art description on that was basically 'a large, carnivorous black creature.' I cut loose and had fun with it and ended up with a psycho-killer rabbit -- something that has born all manner of jokes since then. The artwork struck a chord with people too as they used the concept in one of the first TV commercials they ran for **Magic** a few years ago, and that was a very satisfying thing to see."

As far as playing the game is concerned, Matt is true old-school, but doesn't play much anymore. "Few people can say they played **Magic** before I did. I was roommates with a couple of guys who worked in a game store in Southern California when **Magic** first came out. At the time, WotC had sent two starter decks to every store they could to sort of seed the game -- only two decks was almost impossible to put out on the shelf and try and sell. So my roommates brought the decks home and we divided up the cards and started playing. Instant addiction. I think we played just about every night then for the next couple years. Eventually, I started working in the industry, and so my play time sort of disappeared, but I can claim to be one of the first casual players of **Magic**... I just sucked at it."

Reya Dawnbringer

Art description (from *Invasion Blinding Light*): "An angel hovers at the center of a intense supernova-type explosion, blinding all humans and Phyrexian ground troops nearby."



Reyra Dawnbringer is a classic case of art being switched because one piece represented the character better than another. "The piece I illustrated was called 'Blinding Light', but the R&D folks thought the angel I did for that card would make a good Reyra, so they swapped it. However, the color guidelines are pretty much the same on all of the cards. So, every white card description, for instance, will indicate that same palette above in an attempt to create a consistent color theme throughout the set. Honestly, myself and most other artists pretty much disregard that info and do what feels right for the painting. For the Reyra painting, I wanted something very warm, so you felt like you were basking in

the angel's glow when you look at the painting. She was also supposed to be wearing metal armor, so the metal tones came in. The end result was not a conscious choice to incorporate the color suggestions, just the product of what felt natural for the painting." Obviously this switch worked out well, as the art for Reya became not only iconic for *Invasion*, but for **Magic** as a whole.

As far as the actual art goes, Matt used a few tricks to make sure the focus was kept on the angel, and the piece was even edited a bit to take it a step further. "The original description called for the angel to be creating a bright light that repelled all other creatures. There are two creatures featured in the [full] piece. One is a Metathran and the other is a Phyrexian warrior of some sort. However, they cropped in on the angel as much as possible for the card, so these guys get omitted for the most part. It's okay with me though, because they're the part I like least about the painting. Mostly, I didn't want to obscure the form of the angel, which, let's be straight about it, is what people want to see. Who cares what the card does? Do you want to see the beautiful angel, or do you want to see the same horde of creatures that you've got on all of the other cards? So, I pushed them as far to the edges as I possibly could to give maximum exposure to the central figure. The original painting is actually done in a vertical format, and there is much more leg and wing visible."

Stronghold Assassin



Stronghold Assassin's mechanic allows its controller to sacrifice a creature to destroy another. This idea of sucking energy from a creature to power the Assassin's ability is depicted rather boldly in this

piece. "[The art description] had more to do with the function of the card than the actual scene... the assassin has this big hypodermic power needle thing that he sticks you with, then he siphons the life force off into himself, which is what the hose going to his head is all about." But did Matt's art for the card go a bit too far? Stronghold Assassin is definitely one of the most graphic images to ever grace a **Magic** card. "I've tried to push the envelope whenever I could. If I do my job right, then hopefully there's an emotional response to the artwork I do. If the piece is supposed to invoke fear or horror, I want to try and bring that across. However, I also try and do this without being gratuitous. There's a little bit of blood on that piece, but it's not like there's a bunch of entrails hanging out or something. It's just that the way I composed the piece and the contrast between the assassin, who clearly enjoys his dark work, and the suffering soldier, who doesn't really enjoy the assassin's work all that much, all works to make you think, 'Man, I'm glad that's not me.' The reason for this was two-fold. We were trying to get more 'grit' into the *Tempest* set than was accustomed to in **Magic** previously. We wanted to challenge people's positions, wake them up a little and tell them that this was not their father's fantasy. Second, I wanted to illustrate the concept of the mechanic as closely as possible, so I needed to get across what the assassin was doing." And just who was the model for the Assassin's unfortunate victim? "I don't do self portraits very often... maybe twice or three times in my life, but the soldier who's getting his eye poked out -- well, that's me with a shaved head."

Part of what makes the art for the card stand out is that the weapon used by the Assassin is very unconventional. "That was all just design. I wanted a cool looking assassin weapon that defied expectations. The easy thing to do would have been to give him a creepy dagger, but that's been done with nearly every assassin ever painted. This was an opportunity to do something wildly different, so I ran with it. The weapon looks painful. The tube is disgusting. I wanted to show a death that you clearly would not want to experience. I wanted to disturb your sensibilities a little bit." As it turns out, the art never really offended any of the higher-ups at Wizards. In fact, this sort of style was encouraged for the *Stronghold* set. However, Matt is quick to point out a double-standard that existed at the time. "We were tasked with 'going the extra mile' with that set. We pushed it as far as we could. The funny thing is that no one ever had any objection to that painting. What they objected to was the 'Avenging Angel'. The folks in charge of approving (censoring) the artwork were far more concerned with being overly sexy or appealing than being overly violent or horrific. The Avenging Angel piece originally had white 'briefs,' which they preferred to call 'panties' and decided was much too titillating for teenage boys, so they digitally re-colored them to match the rest of her uniform. Does Wonder Woman wear panties or briefs? Are those panties on Batman? Good thing they're not tighty-whities, or we'd have a whole generation of subverted youth on our hands. I'm getting off on a little bit of a rant, but there's something a bit skewed when you contrast the two, isn't there? Stronghold Assassin: No problem. Avenging Angel: Dear God! She has white panties!" [Editor's Note: According to Brady Dommermuth, the **Magic** creative director, "sexy" isn't a problem as long as women aren't objectified and negative stereotypes aren't reinforced. In other words, no "damsels in distress."]

Urza's Rage

Art description: "Location: Koilos Battlefield. Urza, in his Titan Suit, casts a major destructive fire spell; Urza should have the amalgamated coalition symbol."



An interesting aspect of this piece is that Urza himself is nowhere to be seen. "Well, he really wouldn't have looked like much. The picture window on a card is one-and-a-half inches high. I wanted to get the full battlesuit in there, and seeing Urza in through the little glass window would have made him about two millimeters high. Ever try and paint someone's face when they're only two millimeters high?" Another interesting challenge presented by the description is the idea of incorporating the mechanical and technological elements suggested into the fantasy realm of **Magic**. How does one go about merging the two, while avoiding a style clash? "If you're going to incorporate tech into fantasy, then it needs to feel like it could be fantasy. However, **Magic** isn't trying to be a traditional fantasy setting like **D&D**. It's happened on a number of occasions by default, but the push has always been to make it different and unique."

For example, the fire coming out of the suit does not have a specific starting point. Instead, it wraps around Urza and shoots out to his target. "This was part of that attempt to make it more fantastic than sci-fi. The fire is supposed to be a spell effect, not ammunition fired from a weapon. To show this, I wanted the spell to look like it materialized around him instead of being projected from a mechanical device. The 'gun' on the head was actually some sort of magical tuning fork that helped Urza cast spells."

Matt lives in Seattle with his wife Sherry, "who is much smarter and prettier than myself," their dog Argus, "who isn't smarter, but he's cuter," and their cat Toonces, "who is smarter than everyone put together, but is perpetually cranky." As far as work outside the **Magic** realm is concerned, Matt has quite an impressive resume. "I art directed, helped design, and did a great deal of artwork for *Legend of the Five Rings* -- my first painted work. I've also worked on a number of Wizards CCGs,

like *Battletech*, *Vampire*, and *Netrunner*. I've done a good amount of **Dungeons and Dragons**, and I spent two years as an illustrator for the late FASA, so I worked on all of their product lines including *Shadowrun*, *Earthdawn*, and the ill-fated *Vor: the Maelstrom*. I've done the occasional White Wolf project, a smattering of other CCGs, magazine covers now and then, and a couple of stints in video games. Lately I've been doing a great deal of work for Privateer Press, publishers of D20 products and miniatures games. Last year I finished a trio of covers for their series titled the *Witchfire Trilogy*, which has been some of my favorite work to date."

You can meet Matt at [GenCon](#), and he also may appear at the [San Diego Comic-Con](#). You can check out his website mattwilsonart.com for the latest updates on his appearances, and you can also pick up proofs, prints, and original art.

Matthew Wilson Card Gallery

(Click each cardname to view)

Silver Seraph	<i>Judgment</i>	Tethered Griffin	<i>Urza's Destiny</i>
Masked Gorgon	<i>Judgment</i>	Palinchron	<i>Urza's Legacy</i>
Breaking Point	<i>Judgment</i>	Purging Scythe	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Knight Errant	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Telepathy	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Serra Advocate	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Herald of Serra	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Urza's Rage	<i>Invasion</i>	Seasoned Marshal	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Wash Out	<i>Invasion</i>	Keeper of the Mind	<i>Exodus</i>
Obsidian Acolyte	<i>Invasion</i>	Exalted Dragon	<i>Exodus</i>
Reya Dawnbringer	<i>Invasion</i>	Rabid Rats	<i>Stronghold</i>
Spirit Weaver	<i>Invasion</i>	Stronghold Assassin	<i>Stronghold</i>
Flay	<i>Prophecy</i>	Heat of Battle	<i>Stronghold</i>
Jolrael, Empress of Beasts	<i>Prophecy</i>	Dream Halls	<i>Stronghold</i>
Spineless Thug	<i>Nemesis</i>	Temper	<i>Stronghold</i>
Daze	<i>Nemesis</i>	Phyrexian Hulk	<i>Tempest</i>
Revive	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Kezzerdrix	<i>Tempest</i>
Kris Mage	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Dauthi Mercenary	<i>Tempest</i>
Crag Saurian	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Skyshroud Troll	<i>Tempest</i>
Coastal Piracy	<i>Mercadian</i>	Soltari Lancer	<i>Tempest</i>

	<i>Masques</i>		
Ballista Squad	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Avenging Angel	<i>Tempest</i>
Ramosian Captain	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Selenia, Dark Angel	<i>Tempest</i>
Disease Carriers	<i>Urza's Destiny</i>	Dakmor Sorceress	<i>Portal Second Age</i>
Yavimaya Enchantress	<i>Urza's Destiny</i>	Sex Appeal	<i>Unglued</i>
Rayne, Academy Chancellor	<i>Urza's Destiny</i>	Miss Demeanor	<i>Unglued</i>
Treachery	<i>Urza's Destiny</i>		

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