

The quintessential land man

Behind the Canvas: John Avon

Toby Wachter

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*The results of "Selecting Eighth Edition" have shown us that John Avon is one of the most well-loved illustrators working on **Magic** today. His work, especially on land cards, is some of the most striking in the game. Here is the "Behind the Canvas" interview Toby Wachter did with John earlier in the year.*

—Aaron

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Some artists have styles that are both unique and accessible, yet not easily defined. A player may be a fan of a particular artist without being able to say exactly why. The foundation of John Avon's style is twofold: He uses a computer at the conceptual stage, and then uses paint and airbrushing to impart light and atmosphere into his work. It's this unique visual stamp that let's you know you're looking at a John Avon piece, whether it's the glow of Slithery Stalker or the brilliant lightning on Pyrotechnics.

John, who was born in Wales, fondly remembers his first childhood sketches. "From a very young age, my sister and I would sit together drawing and painting. I recall lots of ships, aircraft, and all the usual boyish-type things. My parents always encouraged us to be creative, and being born in 1961, there was much less emphasis on television and more left to the imagination. I have memories of getting totally lost in painting, and when my knowledge of a subject would run out, I would just go 'weird.' I loved to juxtapose two totally disparate objects. It was a big day when I first saw a book on the bizarre Salvador Dali."

Growing up, John always knew that art was what he wanted to do with his life. "When it came to having serious chats about my future with my Mum and Dad (towards the end of my schooling years), it seemed very obvious that my ability and enthusiasm for art seemed miles ahead of anything else. My folks were great; they saw where my passion lay and never tried to push me into anything that was not really 'me.'"

So, with his parents' approval, John went to art school. "My first experience of 'proper' art education was a one-year foundation course near my hometown in Cardiff, Wales. Then I left home to earn a BA in Graphic Design at Brighton in England."

Interestingly enough, John felt a bit out of place with the stereotypical "pretentious art student" attitudes of those around him. "My style of painting had always been--and still is--pretty traditional. So, it was a big shock to be in a new town . . . surrounded by other art students who mostly seemed

to be doing more trendy or fashionable work. Suddenly, I felt like a fish out of water. Those were challenging times on every level. Did it help me to develop my skills? Well, it gave me three years to experiment, but . . . I can honestly say that no teacher--at any point--ever sat down and talked to me about technique or the way I painted. This I had to do on my own. Maybe I should have dyed my hair orange; worn enormous, ill-fitting coats; and made huge thirty-foot murals of certain areas of anatomy."

Once he finished school, John started doing book covers, which to this day are a staple medium for him. "After leaving college, I soon managed to pick up my first book cover. It was so exciting to see it in print at the corner shop! By the late 1980s, I was producing about three covers a month, for all manner of subjects--from meditation to spaceships--and working for authors like Arthur C. Clarke, Terry Pratchett, and Mr. Stephen King."

And just what does John Avon think of creating art with computers? "I have often been asked what I think about how digital art affects painting and the purity of the whole artistic process. It's always been crystal clear to me. A computer is no more than a very glorified tool. We live in an age in which the hardware and software is just incredible! But--and this is a big 'but'--it does nothing on its own (apart from some surface filters). It's the artist's 'input' that creates the 'output.'"

In addition, the use of computers has allowed John to expand his conceptual capabilities. "I have been using Photoshop for about seven years, and I can quite honestly say it has enabled me to 'think' quickly, and to try out new ideas and concepts that I know I would not ever have been able to do just with paint or a pencil. The paintings I do for **Magic**, for example, have to be produced on a very strict timeline, and the ideas suggested are pretty wacky and often complex."

Using computers also lets John produce his work more efficiently. "As I am in this job to make a living--as well as a satisfying career--my computer helps me create and edit concepts, designs, and color very quickly before committing to paint. Once the drawing or idea is approved, then I get the paints out, and it's over to technique, with the clients getting the job on time. To me, there are two different issues here. First, there is the commercial world, where you are working for a client/brief, which can and does cross over into art. Second, there is the craft art world, where the emphasis is much more on the medium and the whole process."

How does John feel about potential criticism that art shouldn't be "corrupted" by technology? "Why should it matter? If the end result makes people happy, just live and let live." John still uses paint for his **Magic** pieces, even though all his other work is created on computer. "Currently, **Magic** is the only time the tubes of acrylic paints come out, and it's great. My advertising and book covers all stay digital, but I can still get a taste of the traditional process. One makes me appreciate the other."

John enjoys doing fantasy art because of the freedom it gives him. "What I love about fantasy and science fiction is that there is just no limit to the imagination. When I come home from work--unlike a lot of people who will watch endless soap operas with couples shouting about divorce and how their neighbor's cat has done a poo in their flower bed--I just want to be 'off-world' as much as possible. I get enough reality just helping bring up our two little boys and paying the gas bill! When you watch shows like *Star Trek*, you can go anywhere and do anything (within the bounds of basic reason); it seriously is in tune with my very, very vivid imagination. I actually believe that for some of us, fantasy

is more of a reality--because more creative issues can be explored--than an endless cycle of what is termed normal."

Like so many other artists, this unique perspective on life contributes greatly to John's work. "Someone once said to me, 'Do you know you're really weird?' To which I said, 'Thanks! That makes me pretty normal then!' I just love the fact that I am paid to go into work to paint, for example, an underwater, meditating octoperson (cephalid) or a zombie druid with black magic flowing out of its head!"

As you can tell, illustrating **Magic** cards is something John really enjoys. "It suits my need to express my endless surreal ideas. It is great fun, but not silly--the characters and the creatures are wacky without being too crazy. The **Magic** art directors allow the artists to put their own personalities into their work--all within the confines of a structured brief, of course. So we can't go *too* over the top! It can also be pretty challenging. Especially recently, the number of assignments that have arrived have made me think 'What?! How the *hell* can I illustrate that?' But then out comes the pencil, the weird collection of files and books, and this oh-so-strange beast called 'inspiration.'"

John also finds that creating album covers and book covers can often be a bit of a hassle, while his **Magic** work really lets his creative side go crazy. "One of the reasons I enjoy **Magic** so much is that as an artist you are just not messed around with too much. Book covers are increasingly becoming so problematic, and with a whole hierarchy of people giving opinions, it takes forever to get sketches approved. My experience with the music industry has not been good--huge egos and two-faced idiots. Advertising can be great--I know some really nice people--but the amount of money flying about creates an atmosphere of pressure that is so at odds with creativity. Yes, it can be a real buzz, but too much and I just go *nuts!*"

As far as personal favorites go, John really likes one of his newest creations. "I was excited by Thriss, Nantuko Primus. (Wow, what a job the person has who is being paid to come up with these names!) It was one of my first very complex creature characters, and I had a ball creating this beast. It took ages to concept, but it seemed to take on a life of its own, and as so often happens in this job, you are aware of something truly bizarre coming out."

Playing the game is something John's had a little bit of experience with, but he hopes to play more in the future. "Regarding the game itself, I admit to having little skill, but I was taught the basics in Frankfurt two years ago by Frank Jagger of Amigo. I understand the core concepts and logistics. That Richard Garfield is a clever chap, indeed! It seems like pretty exciting stuff, and I soon hope to find space in my life to really play it properly. One of our sons, Laurie, who is six, collects the cards, so I will soon do battle with him."

Pyrotechnics

Art description: "A large lightning bolt from a stormy sky zaps two drakes in flight, then continues downward to zap one more. All three drakes are being electrocuted at exactly the same moment in time."



The art description for this card asked for many different elements, yet John was able to get them all in. In fact, the only real problem with this piece involved a funny miscommunication between John and Wizards of the Coast's art department. "Pyrotechnics was a pretty straightforward card to do, except for one rather silly thing that happened. When Dana (the art director) sent the briefs for *Seventh Edition*, deadlines meant I was under pressure to get the sketches off quite quickly. Reading the brief, I thought 'drakes' meant male ducks! So, I did a drawing of ducks being blown out the sky by lightning bolts, thinking 'will this be okay with animal rights?' I sent it off and soon found out that drakes in **Magic** are, of course, more like dragons!"

The lightning in the piece, along with the illuminated clouds in the sky, radiates a "glow" that seems to be a constant theme in John's **Magic** art. "The lightning was all done with my trusted Conopiose 'E' airbrush and the regular acrylics. People often mail me about the light effect I get in my work. It's really just a matter of tonality. With small illustrations like **Magic** cards, light and shade are pretty important to me. I always try to put pure white in somewhere: It makes the blacks blacker and colors richer. That's the theory anyway!"

Life Burst

Art description (from the *Invasion* card Balancing Act): "This is a white card and should be a non-representational piece about balance - the best way that you can convey the sense that things are being realigned to create a sense of balance."



This piece is an example of art being switched for a card because it's more appropriate for something else. In this case, the description was for a card named A New Balance, which eventually became Balancing Act. To date, it represents the boldest use of computer effects on a **Magic** card, a feature that has made it very popular. "[Life Burst] is actually based on an earlier job I had done for a book cover. I was running late with my deadlines and needed to come up with something quick. The piece is done in oil paint and represents balance, but in a way that is simple and clean looking. The artwork was scanned in, then reworked in Photoshop to create the illusion of movement and depth."

Ironically, the end result wasn't what John originally intended, yet it was well received by both players and the powers that be at Wizards of the Coast. "Wizards was happy, and it has proved to be one of my most popular pieces! I would like to think it has something to do with art, but let's be honest--it's probably due to the fact that she's a pretty blonde! Please no more email requests for her phone number!"

Mirage Mountains



Obviously there is a different challenge involved with creating art for basic lands because they can be somewhat generic. *Mirage* was one of the first, if not *the* first, set to contain detailed, realistic basic lands such as these mountains. Each of the four mountains has an entirely different flavor to it. One is green and cloudy/misty; one shows sandy mountains in a desert; one has jagged, rocky peaks; and one has a massive mountain dominating the scene, along with a tranquil sunset. This was a drastic departure from previous basic lands (Alpha through *Fourth Edition* and *Ice Age*), and pieces such as John's mountains helped break that mold.

"The *Mirage* mountains will always mean a lot to me. They were my very first **Magic** cards, and I thought I would do them differently. They seem to work okay and established 'John Avon' as a land artist. This happened only because the art director at the time asked me what I wanted to do. I had done so many figurative book covers, and I just wanted a change, so I requested mountains." The incredible amount of range among the four pieces is a reflection of the art department's approach to basic lands at the time. "In those days, there was much less awareness of the colors of basic lands, so it just seemed logical to me to make each mountain as different as possible."

John currently lives in England in a small town called Saltdean. "It's just a few minutes from the seaside and rolling farmland. It's pretty quiet out here, but suits us well. I am lucky to be married to my best friend, Pat, who is also an illustrator (of greeting cards and children's books), and we have two little sons, Laurie and James." You can check out John's website at www.johnavon.com to see

some of his book covers, album covers, and advertising pieces. You can also purchase original art and find out which events he will attend.

"I find the events great fun. It's brilliant meeting all these new people, and it always brings out the clown in me. It really is quite an experience signing your name thousands of times. My hand feels like it's been hit by a car by the time I escape to the hotel (or closest bar)."

As far as his job and experiences go, John sums it up nicely. "Ultimately, I know I have a great job. It is exciting and I even get to travel all over the world. Painting is one of the most immediate forms of communicating, and I am a lucky person to be able to vent my imagination in such a fun way!"

John Avon Card Gallery

(Click each cardname to view)

Anger	<i>Judgment</i>	Opalescence	<i>Urza's Destiny</i>
Quiet Speculation	<i>Judgment</i>	Scent of Ivy	<i>Urza's Destiny</i>
Thriss, Nantuko Primus	<i>Judgment</i>	Scent of Nightshade	<i>Urza's Destiny</i>
Wormfang Turtle	<i>Judgment</i>	Aura Flux	<i>Urza's Legacy</i>
Arrogant Wurm	<i>Torment</i>	Harmonic Convergence	<i>Urza's Legacy</i>
Insidious Dreams	<i>Torment</i>	Purify	<i>Urza's Legacy</i>
Slithery Stalker	<i>Torment</i>	Mountain [Version 1]	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Angelic Wall	<i>Odyssey</i>	Mountain [Version 2]	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Barbarian Ring	<i>Odyssey</i>	Mountain [Version 3]	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Cabal Pit	<i>Odyssey</i>	Mountain [Version 4]	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Caustic Tar	<i>Odyssey</i>	Swamp [Version 1]	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Centaur Garden	<i>Odyssey</i>	Swamp [Version 2]	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Cephalid Coliseum	<i>Odyssey</i>	Swamp [Version 3]	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Chlorophant	<i>Odyssey</i>	Swamp [Version 4]	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Confessor	<i>Odyssey</i>	Fog	<i>Fifth Edition</i>
Life Burst	<i>Odyssey</i>	Ice Floe	<i>Fifth Edition</i>
Mossfire Valley	<i>Odyssey</i>	Mountain [Version 1]	<i>Fifth Edition</i>
Adarkar Wastes	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Mountain [Version 2]	<i>Fifth Edition</i>
Forest [Version 3]	<i>Seventh</i>	Mountain [Version	<i>Fifth Edition</i>

	<i>Edition</i>	3]	
Forest [Version 4]	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Mountain [Version 4]	<i>Fifth Edition</i>
Island [Version 3]	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Lotus Vale	<i>Weatherlight</i>
Millstone	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Scorched Ruins	<i>Weatherlight</i>
Mountain [Version 4]	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Winding Canyons	<i>Weatherlight</i>
Plains [Version 4]	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Coral Atoll	<i>Visions</i>
Pyrotechnics	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Dormant Volcano	<i>Visions</i>
Wall of Air	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Jungle Basin	<i>Visions</i>
Illusion/Reality (Illusion)	<i>Apocalypse</i>	Grasslands	<i>Mirage</i>
Legacy Weapon	<i>Apocalypse</i>	Mountain [Version 1]	<i>Mirage</i>
Strength of Night	<i>Apocalypse</i>	Mountain [Version 2]	<i>Mirage</i>
Tranquil Path	<i>Apocalypse</i>	Mountain [Version 3]	<i>Mirage</i>
Dominaria's Judgment	<i>Planeshift</i>	Mountain [Version 4]	<i>Mirage</i>
Meteor Crater	<i>Planeshift</i>	Island [Version 1]	<i>Portal Second Age</i>
Nemata, Grove Guardian	<i>Planeshift</i>	Island [Version 2]	<i>Portal Second Age</i>
Singe	<i>Planeshift</i>	Island [Version 3]	<i>Portal Second Age</i>
Forest [Version 1]	<i>Invasion</i>	Armageddon	<i>Portal</i>
Geothermal Crevice	<i>Invasion</i>	Cloud Dragon	<i>Portal</i>
Island [Version 2]	<i>Invasion</i>	Forest [Version 1]	<i>Portal</i>
Meteor Storm	<i>Invasion</i>	Forest [Version 2]	<i>Portal</i>
Plains [Version 1]	<i>Invasion</i>	Forest [Version 3]	<i>Portal</i>
Spirit of Resistance	<i>Invasion</i>	Forest [Version 4]	<i>Portal</i>
Tangle	<i>Invasion</i>	Renewing Dawn	<i>Portal</i>

Flame Jet

*Urza's
Destiny*

Starlight

Portal

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