

Self-taught master of the "Tradigital" Behind the Canvas: Arnie Swekel

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Artist Arnie Swekel at home with his two children. The greatest assets an artist can have are creativity and a love for his or her work. For Arnie Swekel, both are certainly in place. As an avid science fiction fan and gamer in his youth, Arnie developed an interest in monsters, aliens, and other staples of the fantasy genre. As a mostly self-taught artist, Arnie has been able to make a living off of his sci-fi and fantasy obsession by creating some breathtaking, iconic images for the **Magic** game and other games and publications, as well as commercial art.

Arnie always had an interest in art, but he didn't see it as a career opportunity until later in life. "I've been sketching creatures since I could pick up a pencil. [I] didn't start actually making a living at it until I was twenty-seven though." He did aim for a career by going to art school, but one semester was all it took for Arnie to lose interest. "I didn't have much in the way of education. I went to Art School for half a year and hated it. I was an idiot. I should've stayed and gone through the process and learned. It sounds great to say that I'm self-taught, but in reality, my life would've been much easier if I [had] wised up and stayed in school." Despite this, Arnie has managed to become a very successful artist, which he attributes to the kind of real-life experience you can't get in a classroom. "With all the eclectic jobs and strange places and people I've met in my life, it's almost as if I got my art education outside school. Each situation, person you meet, and place you visit influences your art and writing. Writers and artists are all students of life. What we see, do, and experience affects our work."

His interest in art, specifically within the fantasy genre, never diminished. He was hesitant to get involved in the field because he felt that his work might not be good enough. "My close friends and family kept trying to get me to send my work into TSR [the company that published **D&D** -- it became part of Wizards of the Coast in 1997] and publications like *Heavy Metal*. I just never thought I was good enough. I'm finding that's a sentiment shared by a lot of creative people. You admire so many others that work in the field you'd like to be a part of, you start to believe that your work could never measure up." As it turned out, Arnie was so good that he got work right on the spot. "At twenty-nine, I sent my samples into TSR and Chaosium. I got work the next week. The funny thing is they loved everything I did when I was eighteen. So, my fear of rejection held me back for eleven years. There's a lesson in there for up[-and-]coming artists: If you'd like to be a part of something, get a thick skin and be smart enough to approach those who do what you'd like to do and ask questions. Don't wait like I did. I could've been doing this for twenty-one years instead of ten."

So what inspires Arnie? "I'll tell you the truth right now and say a check! Ha, ha! Sorry. In truth, the old masters have always drawn my attention. I was in Austria last year and got to see original Michelangelos, Rubenses, Dürers, and da Vincis. I'll never forget [that] as long as I live." By contrast, Arnie also draws quite a bit from modern fantasy art in media. "I'm inspired by creatures created for video games and movies. I love when an artist is asked to envision an environment, a creature, or even clothing or vehicles for a place and time that doesn't exist. When it all works on screen it's glorious! I'm doing a bit of that myself right now." His motivations have changed a bit since he was a kid, but the end result has always been positive in one way or another. "In high school and during [my] college years, I would have told you that I did art for girls' attention. Telling girls you're an artist never hurt. Now, I'd say that not only do I get paid for doing something I like, but I get to support my family with something that always changes. Each and every piece I do is nothing like the piece before.

Some commons signed by Swekel: Silt Crawler, Caldera Kavu, and Aquamoeba

Each one is challenging and amazing. I'm the luckiest guy in the world!"

Another interesting aspect of Arnie's **Magic** work is that all but one of his pieces (Hoodwink) has been created in part on computer. This creates some stunning visual effects, as is the case with Blistering Firecat, and also lets Arnie produce work more efficiently. "I scan in a pencil and paint the piece as if it were an oil painting. I then print it out on watercolor paper and add some watercolor and colored pencil to finish it off. So I guess it's an amalgamation of styles. The most beneficial trait of this style is the speed. I can paint three cards in the time it would've taken me to paint one in traditional oils. I call my style 'Tradigital.'" What about criticism that computers somehow take away the "purity" of art? "All those artists who gave me the 'Is it real art?' speech are all, every one of them, doing work exactly as I do on the computer now. The benefit of the speed and versatility of the style are incredible. What it boils down to is this: doing work digitally is just another medium for an artist. Many **Magic** artists work digitally but you'd never know it. Each [artist] has a distinctive style just as if [he or she] were working in oils or watercolors. You simply apply your knowledge to the tool at hand."

Of course, Arnie's sci-fi obsession translates well to his work within the fantasy genre. "Well, sci-fi and fantasy go hand in hand in my mind. I've always loved the subject and couldn't get enough of it as a kid. Comic books and old movies shown in the basement of the library on the weekend were the cool things when I was young. We only had three channels on our black-and-white TV, and there weren't any video games or DVDs to watch or listen to. So, my imagination was fed by the occasional tidbits of sci-fi or fantasy. That's why today I'm so interested in something that's new or different, something that pushes the boundaries. You've got to love something to be good at it." But can't this be detrimental in some ways? "Nope, a little escapism never hurt anyone. My wife doesn't like dressing up like Princess Leia for me anymore. I guess that's detrimental. But hey, even if you want your wife to dress like a Wookiee occasionally, how can it hurt?"

As far as the **Magic** work is concerned, Arnie really enjoys the travel perks and being able to meet gamers like him from all around the world at major events. "Not only is it an incredible game, but the subject matter is out of this world. The best part is not creating the cards, though that is something I

absolutely *love*. The coolest part is in the last couple of years I've had a chance to meet people from all over the world. The one thing they have in common is **Magic**. I grew up in the U.S. and now have visited Europe several times and Asia twice. I find that gamers are gamers no matter where they're from." For him, the **Magic** game is a universal language that transcends cultural differences. "The beauty of **Magic** , even if no one sees it, is that it has no boundaries. Anyone can play, and anyone is welcome. [While signing **Magic** cards,] I've met some unbelievably cool people and made some great friends . . . [I've] realized that the world is actually pretty small. I've played **Magic** with people I've never met before, and though our cards have different languages on them we understand each other perfectly."

That's right, Arnie likes to shuffle up a deck and play a few games just like you. Unfortunately his work responsibilities have made it harder for him to play. "I used to play twice a week, then it went to once every two weeks. Now, I've just started a new full-time job and have a family. So, I'm afraid I've sold all my cards." Did he have any favorite formats? "Yep, I loved playing Type 1! I had a killer Cleric deck, I know it sounds absurd, but that thing killed in multiplayer. I had an Elf deck and a foiled, signed Kavu deck that it destroyed me to get rid of. Wish I had more time to play though. When my kids are old enough, I'll introduce them to the game and I'll get back into it then."

The interesting thing is, Arnie started playing the game because he got an assignment to work on it. "I started with [*Mercadian Masques*]. I was working with **D&D** for years, and one day they asked me if I'd like to do anything with **Magic**. I had no idea what it was! I went to the local card store and sat in on a couple of games, and I loved it! The strategy and competitive nature of the game drew me right in. I called them back immediately and said I'd love to be a part of it. Actually, I have the art director of **D&D** to thank. It was at her suggestion that the art director of Magic gave me a call." Arnie's favorite **Magic** art are the pieces where he gets to explore areas that haven't been defined. "The ones I like the most are the ones where I've created a creature that no one has seen in the game before, and I get to introduce not only my design but my art as well. Pieces like Anurid Brushhopper, Sylvan Might, Riptide Shapeshifter, Springing Tiger, and Thought Nibbler. I loved Dwarven Bloodboiler because I really dig Dwarves. There are a few I'm *very* proud of but they won't be out for the next couple of sets. Hope you guys will dig them as much as I do."

Aquamoeba

Art description: This is a creature card and should show an amorphous creature that is made of water and can change form or appearance. Think of the creature from *The Abyss*.



Right away, Arnie pointed out a part of the art description that was left out of the copy I received. "They basically told me to create a creature made of water coming out of the ocean at night. When you think about it, what do you show?" This, combined with a few other elements caused Arnie to not be that happy with the final product. "It's funny you mention Aquamoeba. Out of all the cards I've done, from the printed to the yet-to-come-out, I dislike the art for Aquamoeba the most. It's a personal thing with artists. There's always one that each artist dislikes and really would rather not talk about. It's funny, I get asked for prints of that piece all the time. But I won't have them done. I really dislike the piece. I like the card though and have used it with its gimmick on more than one occasion."

It's not as if this was due to lack of effort on Arnie's part. "A card usually takes me one to three hours to sketch and eight to twelve hours to paint. This one took eighteen, and I have no idea why. Man, I dislike it!" As a sci-fi buff, did he bother to look at *The Abyss* for inspiration? "No, actually when asked to look at a movie for inspiration I get disappointed. I'd rather do something that has never been done before." If given a second chance, Arnie would make the blue madness outlet look much different. "I'd repaint the thing from top to bottom. Take a whole new perspective and probably do it in twilight for the rich colors."

Raging Kavv

Art description: Location: Yavimaya

Upright dingo lizard, 15', heavy back limbs and sharp, quick forelimbs, crushing and tearing apart a 10' Phyrexian.



Obviously the guidelines for this piece were stricter than others, but Arnie managed to bend them a little and come out with something that made him, the players, and R&D happy. "Well, to tell you the truth, I changed the description a lot. That's something I don't normally do, but when I was speaking with the art director he told me that it would probably be one of the lesser Kavus if not the smallest one. So, being a player I wanted to really do something that would stand out. I had fun and hoped they wouldn't yell at me. I was going to add the Phyrexian to the design but it would've shown you the true size of the Kavus. So I left him out. Luckily, they liked the sketch enough to let me go ahead and start painting. They really liked it. And it's an honor to paint **Magic** cards, but an even bigger one to get a Prerelease card. I was stunned. I recently received a couple hundred cards that I give away at signings. Only at signings, and only to kids under twelve."

The end product is an in-your-face Kavus with an attitude that matches the card's fast, instant speed and haste mechanic. "When you want the main focus on something, a warm bright color brings it forward in the illustration. Cool blues take things back in the distance. Even though it's a two dimensional piece, using these theories paid off." With the creature popping out, Arnie used the dust on the floor to create a feeling of movement. "A cave probably isn't dusty though. It's more likely wet. It just seemed the thing to do to get it moving, a little more action."

Overall, Arnie's feelings about Raging Kavu are the opposite of Aquamoeba. "I wouldn't change a thing. I dig it the way it is, and I'm proud of it. It's one of the few things I've done in the last couple of years that I liked."

Blistering Firecat

Art description: Color: Red

Location: Skirk Ridge

Action: Giant fierce looking charging firecat (see ODY Pardic Firecat for reference).

Focus: Firecat

Mood: Action

Notes: Made of fire, not on fire



Readers who have been following this column for a while will notice that this art description is different from the format used in the past. Location, action, mood, and so on are noted to create a more detailed description. "I've never had an issue or even considered how they came up with the descriptions. Either the art [director] or the R&D guys come up with it. Gotta say though, the R&D guys are amazing. Imagine what they have to come up with each and every set. Not only that, but the art directors I've worked with on **Magic** are incredible as well. They're two fantastic guys."

This assignment was unique, since Arnie was given the task of producing a creature that is "made of" fire, and not "on fire." It's a key difference that can be hard to generate. "It's actually pretty difficult, but my solution was an easy way out. I looked at all the other creatures that were done so far, my two favorites were the Pardic [Firecat] and the bull that Glen Angus did [Longhorn Firebeast]. But I wanted to do something new. So I thought if the thing looked like it was from a volcano it would be new and interesting. To me it looks like it's made of magma and not fire." Pardic Firecat was referenced in the art description, and Arnie used it as a good place to start. "Pardic Firecat is just a fantastic illustration, and I'm sure they wanted me to look at it for inspiration. Man, that is one great piece of art. That creature is the quintessential illustration for something made of fire and not on fire, which is hard to accomplish."

What really makes this piece stand out is the smoke effect, which definitely catches the attention of many players. "I work on the computer so though it may look easy it was quite difficult. I made a small area of smoke on the computer and kept duplicating it, shading and sculpting until it looked like billowing clouds. The glow and fire of the thing I did with tools on Photoshop, adding brightness here and there creating what I hoped was something that looked like a pyroclastic cloud." Another interesting aspect of the piece is that there is no background, and the claws are darker than the rest of the creature. "[I wanted] to make the creature's face and claws stand out a little more. Again, there isn't anything in the piece showing perspective so it could be as large as you can imagine. It's funny though, the face and claws don't really match the rest of the illustration." Just as with Aquamoeba, Arnie isn't completely happy with Blistering Firecat. "I did a much better job on the smoke than the actual body of the beast. To me, it's glaring and shows, which is why I don't have many prints of that one either. If I could do it again, I'd definitely get back into the claws and face to do a more photo-realistic job with them. I think they'd match better if I did."

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Just recently, Arnie moved to Madison, Wisconsin, where he lives with his wife, two children and two cats. He has done plenty of work aside from **Magic** art. "I started doing some cool stuff for **Pendragon** with the cool people at Chaosium. Since then, I've done a ton of stuff for Wizards of the Coast, TSR, Apophis Consortium, Toy Vault, Sierra, and Middle-Earth. I've done a ton of commercial stuff too. I guess recently the stuff that really has me excited are the "da Vinci" type illustrations for all the **D&D** stuff, **Harry Potter** product stuff and most recent is a cover I did for *Dragon Magazine*, it'll be out very soon." Additionally, Arnie just started a new job with Raven Software. "They've put out such blockbuster games as **Soldier of Fortune**, **Jedi Knight 1** and **2**, and a host of others. It's incredible! I'm working as a concept artist, pretty much doing anything else I can get my hands on. I wish you guys [could] see what I do everyday. When **Quake 4** finally comes out it's gonna storm the world! You've *never* seen anything like this!"

You can get your cards signed by Arnie at Pro Tour - Venice in March . . . just don't ask for an Aquamoeba print.

Arnie Swekel Card Gallery

(Click each cardname to view)

Card

Expansion

Card

Expansion

Riptide Mangler	<i>Legions</i>	Dralnu's Crusade	<i>Planeshift</i>
Berserk Murlodot	<i>Legions</i>	Implode	<i>Planeshift</i>
Blistering Firecat	<i>Onslaught</i>	Caldera Kavv	<i>Planeshift</i>
Riptide Shapeshifter	<i>Onslaught</i>	Mirrorwood Treefolk	<i>Planeshift</i>
Ravenous Baloth	<i>Onslaught</i>	Raging Kavv	<i>Invasion</i>
Towering Baloth	<i>Onslaught</i>	Armored Guardian	<i>Invasion</i>
Phantom Nishoba	<i>Judgment</i>	Distorting Wake	<i>Invasion</i>
Anurid Brushhopper	<i>Judgment</i>	Metathran Zombie	<i>Invasion</i>
Dwarven Bloodboiler	<i>Judgment</i>	Lightning Dart	<i>Invasion</i>
Stitch Together	<i>Judgment</i>	Bend or Break	<i>Invasion</i>
Hydromorph Gull	<i>Torment</i>	Explosive Growth	<i>Invasion</i>
Aquamoeba	<i>Torment</i>	Yawgmoth's Agenda	<i>Invasion</i>
Shambling Swarm	<i>Torment</i>	Crosis's Attendant	<i>Invasion</i>
Pulsating Illusion	<i>Odyssey</i>	Dual Nature	<i>Prophecy</i>
Concentrate	<i>Odyssey</i>	Silt Crawler	<i>Prophecy</i>
Thought Nibbler	<i>Odyssey</i>	Coffin Puppets	<i>Prophecy</i>
Swamp	<i>Odyssey</i>	Stronghold Zeppelin	<i>Nemesis</i>
Sylvan Might	<i>Odyssey</i>	Laccolith Grunt	<i>Nemesis</i>
Springing Tiger	<i>Odyssey</i>	Hoodwink	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>
Tombfire	<i>Odyssey</i>	Giant Caterpillar	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>
Haunting Echoes	<i>Odyssey</i>	Crenellated Wall	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>
Haunted Angel	<i>Apocalypse</i>	Kyren Toy	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>
Raka Disciple	<i>Apocalypse</i>		
Goblin Raider	<i>Seventh Edition</i>		
Fog	<i>Seventh Edition</i>		
Fallen Angel	<i>Seventh</i>		

Hollow Dogs *Edition*
 Seventh
 Edition

Send questions and comments to editor@wizards.com.