

## he Flip Side

# Perspectives of a Writing Grunt

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*This wildly popular article marked the first [magicthegathering.com](#) appearance of former [House of Cards](#) author "JMS" in over a year. Jay is one of those writers that gets you wrapped up on his side right from the start, and this article is no exception. Combine that with one of the first detailed looks inside the world of the flavor text process and it's not hard to imagine why this article got such a popular reception. Since returning to the site with this article JMS has taken over the [Into the Aether](#) column, as well as posting new feature articles on his involvement in the flavor text process as new sets come out. Whether you're getting to read this for the first time or just stopping in for a second (or third) look, I'm sure you'll enjoy this great article.*

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**Y**ou know, I really miss the first six months or so of [Mark Gottlieb's tenure](#) at House of Cards. I had [quit](#) the column to focus on writing fiction, yet every Thursday I could sit back and enjoy the Message Boards, in which outraged fans would call for Mark's head and yearn for my triumphant return.

Then, slowly, my so-called-fans began to realize that Mark was actually pretty funny. In fact, he was probably funnier than What's-His-Name. And he was certainly a better writer. And you know, now that you mention it, his decks were actually more wacky and outrageous. Now every Thursday I have to suffer through a parade of "Can't MaGo write, like, every day?" and "MaGo's best yet!" and "I want to bury myself in MaGo's new beard!" As his popularity has grown, I have come to one inexorable conclusion:



I hate Mark Gottlieb.

My one solace, as I bitterly tap away at a novel no one asked me to write, is that Gottlieb gave up his longstanding gig of writing card names and flavor text in order to have time for House of Cards. Subsequently, soon after Mark took over the column, Brandon Bozzi asked me if I would like to write card names and flavor text for future sets. Fate is a quirky chick, eh?

So, since you last heard from me, I've spent time writing names and flavor text for *Fifth Dawn*, *Champions of Kamigawa*, and now *Betrayers of Kamigawa*. I can't tell you how generally geeked I am at this new role. I'm not sure I'll be having any more kids soon, but if I do one of 'em gets "Bozzi" as a nickname.

At some point it occurred to me that a) no one had ever described how cards get their names and flavor text, and b) I was desperately in need of attention.

So, for this one you'll be getting the perspective of someone relatively new to the process. I'll be talking about what it's like for someone still more a fan than an insider to be involved in **Magic's** creative process. Consider me a poor-man's Aaron Forsythe, for whatever that's worth.

## Welcome to Writing Names and Flavor Text

Roll back the calendar to June of 2003 when I received an e-mail from Brandon outlining who would be writing for *Fifth Dawn*, then codenamed "Tomato." In addition to me, the team was:

- [Josh Bennett](#) (Event Coverage Specialist and One Man Crowd)
- [Doug Beyer](#) (Web Developer for **magicthegathering.com**)
- [George Lanning](#) (Former Director of IT for WotC Retail)
- [Rei Nakazawa](#) (Former WotC staff writer who sometimes writes about **Magic** storylines)
- [Reid Schmadeka](#) (North and South America Events manager)
- [Brian Tinsman](#) (Game designer for **Magic** and all-around creative guy)

Brandon tried to argue that Gottlieb was peripherally involved too, but don't believe it.

Anyway, the e-mail also had enough attachments to do the Library of Congress proud. Brandon politely asked that I review the documents he sent to really immerse myself in the world in which I'd be writing. Included in these documents was a training manual for Namebase.

What's Namebase, you ask? Namebase is the flavor equivalent of the Multiverse database Aaron quotes all of the time. It's where each writer logs his or her name and flavor text suggestions, reads others' submissions, votes on these submissions, and gets pointers from Brandon. To be honest, it's a little clunky and unwieldy, although I have come to realize that's part of Namebase's charm. To me, Namebase is a symbol of Wizards' gamer roots; being relatively new, it's an unpolished system, but vibrant and raw like a garage band.



It was after receiving Brandon's e-mail that the full enormity of what I had signed up to do hit me. I mean, on one hand this was a **Magic** fan's dream, right? I had a crystal ball THREE SETS in advance, I had outlines of the as-yet-unwritten novels, I had the full Style Guide from which most of the [MagicArcana](#) entries originate. With the click of a mouse, Brandon had given me enough confidential, insider information to make me--no kidding--dream of cloaked spies and tapped phones. On the other hand, this was going to be a *lot* of work. I had long held opinions about what constituted good and bad card names. I knew the flavor text that made me roll my eyes. I understood the mastery of *Fallen Empires* and its ability to weave an entire epic through flavor. It was time to put up or shut up, jumping into the third set of a block and trying to catch up.

So I read. A lot. To be honest, I didn't even look at the sets for their playability back then nor did I focus on what cards to make decks around. I was too intent on understanding this weird metallic

fantasy setting that Wizards had created and digesting [Memnarch](#)'s paranoid delusional plots to focus on competitively-costed mechanics. I remember thinking [Platinum Angel](#) was pretty spiffy and that "indestructible" was a neat idea, but the rest is a blur.

## Writing, Rewriting, and Rerewriting

A couple weeks later, Brandon informed us all that it was time to begin. He assigned each person a pair of colors and a cache of artifacts. My colors were white and black, which immediately triggered some uneasiness on my part. White and black? Didn't these people know I'm a green mage at heart? I'm too sissy to write for black! And white is so, so, you know... sissy!

Turns out I needn't have worried. First, there are a mere forty black and white cards in *Fifth Dawn* combined, so most of the work was on artifacts. Second, I didn't really understand the process initially. I thought because my colors were white and black that I would only have an opportunity to contribute to those two colors.

Nope. Writing names and flavor text is a process of submitting ideas for cards, then getting a crack at everyone else's cards in rewrite rounds, then doing it all over again. It's very iterative and organic. I honestly don't know how Brandon and Brady Dommermuth keep everyone's submissions clear in their heads and balance everyone's creativity into a set's flavor.

## What's In A Name?

I was surprised to find that I actually had quite a few personal biases with regards to naming cards. I'll talk about a few cards I named that I think illustrate some of my particular hang-ups.

For each of the cards below, I'll give the R&D name along with all of the information I had to work with in Namebase. If you want, think about what you would have written for a card, keeping the names, mechanics, and world created from the first two sets in mind.

[New Age Wrath]  
Color: White  
Casting Cost: 2WW  
P/T: -  
Spell Type: Instant  
Creature Type: -  
Rules: Destroy all creatures that dealt damage to you this turn.  
Location: Glimmervoid  
Action: A shockwave of devastating light moves outward from where a white-aligned human wizard stands with outstretched arms. The shockwave decimates a group of nim that were clawing at him.  
Focus: The shockwave of light.  
Mood: Divine retribution!  
Notes: See art for Glimmervoid, style guide p. 56 for nim. Suggestion: Would a top-down view work here?

Did the "Mood" line crack you up? Let me tell you, there are some hilarious one-liner Moods in Namebase, but they are strangely accurate in getting you the information you need as a writer (and, I assume, as an artist). Here the Mood provides that testosterone jolt needed when thinking about the name.

Okay, so the R&D Name gives a clue as to this card's roots. This is a [Wrath](#) variant. Also, by my estimation at the time, it was a fairly elegant [Wrath](#) variant.



I believe that cool cards should have cool names. To illustrate what I'm talking about, another card in *Fifth Dawn* I got to name was [Guardian Idol](#). I spent a lot of time throwing out names for [Guardian Idol](#) because I thought it was a great card with a great art description. Some of my other submissions were Silent Sentinel, Steel Totem, Icon of War, Gray Warrior, and Warrior's Statue, to name a few. These are relatively simple names (and you might argue they suck and that MaGo could do better... cretins!), but for me they conjure the image of something worth summoning in a magical duel. Back to our Wrath-variant, I also think particularly straightforward cards should be the ones taking up the "obvious" pithy names available. There can be only one [Rancor](#). If you're going to name a card simply [Rancor](#), it should live up to the moniker.

When looking over my pile of submissions. I'm glad [Retaliate](#) got picked because I think it is a cool, straightforward name for a cool, straightforward card.

[Glass Eyeball]

Color: Artifact

Casting Cost: 1

P/T: -

Spell Type: Artifact

Creature Type: -

Rules: Each player plays with the top card of his or her library revealed. {oT},

Sacrifice [cardname]: Target player shuffles his or her library.

Location: Mephidross

Action: Show a creepy human hand holding a thick iron chain. At the end of the chain dangles a magical lantern whose "shade" is an orb that consists entirely of little eyeballs. No blood or nerve tissue, please.

Focus: The eyeball lamp

Mood: Ah, now I can see clearly

Again, gotta love the Mood. This card may trigger the same thought I had: Who the heck makes up the card concepts? My best guess is Brandon and Brady, but I honestly don't know who got to decide that a cheap artifact is a creepy eyeball lamp. All I know is that I'm not going camping with whoever-it-is without a night light and a club.

Anyway, this card shows another bias: I like **Magic**'s fantasy setting, I am a diehard *Dungeons and Dragons* player, and deep down I want **Magic** to transport me to a classically fantastical place just like *D&D*. I think *D&D* magic items have cool names that sound like ancient tomes, heroic weapons of lore, and cursed baubles. I understand Wizards' desire to keep their two games distinct, but I also like to cheat some *D&D* names into **Magic** whenever possible. Accordingly, I expect I'll submit a lot of names along the same lines of [Lantern of Insight](#).

[White Guardian]

Color: White

Casting Cost: 7WW

P/T: 5/5

Spell Type: Creature -

Creature Type: Bringer

Rules: You may pay {oWoUoBoRoG} rather than pay [cardname]'s mana cost. Trample At the beginning of your upkeep, you may return target artifact card from your graveyard to play.

Location: Razor fields

Action: Show a huge crystalline Humanoid Elk beast in an aggressive pose. The creature has immense crystalline antlers which shine in the sunlight.

Focus: On the beast (5/5).

Mood: Powerful and awe-inspiring.

Notes: This magical beast is made of 100% yellowish/whitish crystal that looks like amber, citrine, or milky quartz.



[Blue Guardian]

Color: Blue

Casting Cost: 7UU

P/T: 5/5

Spell Type: Creature -

Creature Type: Bringer

Rules: You may pay {oWoUoBoRoG} rather than pay [cardname]'s mana cost. Trample At the beginning of your upkeep, you may draw two cards.

Location: Quicksilver sea.

Action: Show a huge crystalline Humanoid Crocodile beast in an aggressive pose.

Focus: On the beast (5/5).

Mood: Powerful.

Notes: This magical beast is made of 100% crystal that looks like topaz or sapphire.

[Black Guardian]

Color: Black

Casting Cost: 7BB

P/T: 5/5

Spell Type: Creature -

Creature Type: Bringer

Rules: You may pay {oWoUoBoRoG} rather than pay [cardname]'s mana cost. Trample At the beginning of your upkeep, you may pay 2 life. If you do, search your library for a card, then shuffle your library and put that card on top of it.

Location: Mephidross swamp

Action: Show a huge crystalline Humanoid Beetle like creature in an aggressive pose.

Focus: On the beast (5/5).

Mood: Powerful and terrifying.

Notes: This magical beast is made of 100% crystal that looks like jet or smoky quartz.

[Red Guardian]

Color: Red

Casting Cost: 7RR

P/T: 5/5

Spell Type: Creature -

Creature Type: Bringer

Rules: You may pay {oWoUoBoRoG} rather than pay [cardname]'s mana cost. Trample At the beginning of your upkeep, you may untap target creature and gain control of it until end of turn. That creature gains haste until end of turn.

Location: Oxidda mountain chain.

Action: Show a huge crystalline Humanoid Bull in an aggressive pose.

Focus: On the beast (5/5).

Mood: Powerful.

Notes: This magical beast is made of 100% crystal that looks like ruby or garnet.

[Green Guardian]

Color: Green

Casting Cost: 7GG

P/T: 5/5

Spell Type: Creature -

Creature Type: Bringer

Rules: You may pay {oWoUoBoRoG} rather than pay [cardname]'s mana cost. Trample At the beginning of your upkeep, you may put a 3/3 green Beast creature token into play.

Location: "The Tangle" Metal Forest

Action: Show a huge aggressive crystalline Humanoid Rhino beast in an aggressive pose.

Focus: On the beast (5/5)

Mood: Powerful

When I visited Renton in March, a lot of the R&D guys asked me my favorite contributions to *Fifth Dawn* card names. After some consideration, I'm most proud to have named the "Bringer of the xx Dawn" cycle for three reasons.

First, I tend to like "of the" names. [Caller of the Claw](#), [Merfolk of the Pearl Trident](#), [Keeper of the Nine Gales](#)--these names conjure cool imagery and allude to a history I don't quite fully understand but appreciate all the same. As long as there are very few in each set, I gravitate towards the "of the" cards as having some of the most evocative names.

Second, these names felt pretty risky to me. I wasn't sure if it was okay to put the word "red" in a red card's name, for example. It's nice to try something different and have it accepted.

Finally, because I like card cycles so much, these were the first cards I worked on naming.

You would not believe the energy it took me to come up with these three (admittedly straightforward) submissions:

1. Amber Sentinel, Sapphire Sentinel, Quartz Sentinel, Ruby Sentinel, Emerald Sentinel

2. Solar Champion, Solar Diviner, Solar Fiend, Solar Berserker, Solar Sovereign
3. [Bringer of the White Dawn](#), [Bringer of the Blue Dawn](#), [Bringer of the Black Dawn](#), [Bringer of the Red Dawn](#), [Bringer of the Green Dawn](#)

To me, the coolest thing about the "Bringer" cycle is that when I submitted the names the set was still called "Tomato." I only found out later that the set was named *Fifth Dawn*, making the Bringers a cornerstone of the set's flavor.

## The Many Faces of Flavor

It takes me a lot more time to write flavor text than to think up card names, and I'm not sure I'm very good at it yet.

In my mind, there are several variants on flavor text:

- **The pun.** *"It wants you to be its chum."* -- [Riptide Mangler](#)
- **The joke.** *"For them, the only honorable death is one that leaves a crater."* -- [Bloodfire Dwarf](#)
- **The plot-thread.** *"As Gerrard's form vanished into the maw of trees, Hanna mouthed a silent plea, mourning a crushed dream."* -- [Abandon Hope](#)
- **The character quotation.** *"If we cannot live proudly, we die so!"* —*Eladamri, Lord of Leaves* -- [Pandemonium](#)
- **The real-world quotation.** *"It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards."* —*Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass* -- [Ancestral Memories](#)
- **The deep saying.** *"A finely crafted blade will never meet as many blows on the battlefield as it did on the anvil."* -- [Pardic Swordsmith](#)
- **The encyclopedic insert.** *"Occasionally, an ally balked at wearing a dead Thrull as armor. The priests' whips, however, were usually enough to encourage a more practical outlook."* -- [Armor Thrull](#)
- **The basic descriptor.** *"To gaze under its hood is to invite death."* -- [Abyssal Specter](#)
- **The scrap of history.** *"The few remaining pieces from this period suggest the Dwarves eventually made weapons and armor out of everything, even children's toys." — Sarpadian Empires, vol. IV* -- [Dwarven Armorer](#)

By the way, Brian Tinsman is a master of the basic descriptor (and card names, for that matter) and Rei Nakizawa writes ridiculously good quotes and encyclopedic inserts. All of the writers have their inspired moments, but Brian and Rei really stun me sometimes.

My personal style is that I like the last three variants of flavor text the most, maybe with some quotes tossed in for good measure. As for the other types, **Magic** flavor text as a whole has drifted away from the plot-threads and real-world quotes. Deep sayings are hard to come up with, but can be great when they work and if used sparingly. I rarely make jokes, and I am not very punny.

The two cards I want to talk about both fall under the encyclopedic insert category. Although I'm proud of all pieces of flavor text I wrote that were accepted (like I said, my confidence level in flavor text is still lacking), the reason I particularly like these two are because I feel like in each I solved a creative puzzle.

[Roused Howler] (the original design was a Beast)

Color: Green

Casting Cost: 3G

P/T: 3/3

Spell Type: Creature -

Creature Type: Elf Shaman

Rules: {o3oG}, {oT}: Target creature gets +X/+X until end of turn, where X is the number of artifacts your opponents control.

Location: A regal elvish chamber in the Tangle 'metal forest'.

Action: This is the Mirrodin elvish 'council of elders' who determine the fighting missions for the elvish warriors. Show a group of older elves, a female in the foreground, and other males and females behind her. They should look regal, wizened, commanding.

Focus: Lead female and a couple of other elves.

Mood: We're in charge.

This card came to me in a rewrite phase and already had the name [Viridian Lorebearers](#) accepted and attached to it. The thing that seemed weird to me about the name was that in the *Mirrodin* cosmology document, it says that elves in this world went through a cycle of systematically forgetting their past (an elaborate plot by [Memnarch](#) to keep the long-lived elves ignorant of his and the world's true nature). So why would a bunch of amnesic elves need lorebearers?

Then I hit on the idea that is represented in its flavor text, that maybe there was a small band of renegades who avoided the forgetting rituals and have surfaced now that the green sun is up. Once this piece was accepted, I proceeded to get way too enamored with this idea and submitted lots of flavor text (none of which made it) from members of this band talking about the reasons for their emergence. Note to self: Don't do that.

[Copper Spider]

Color: Artifact

Casting Cost: 6

P/T: 2/6

Spell Type: Artifact Creature -

Creature Type: Spider

Rules: [Cardname] may block as though it had flying.

Action: See art. (This was one of several pieces where the artist was asked to create a creature from her/his own imagination based on what s/he saw in the style guide. The writers saw the art itself rather than a description.)

I actually like both of my flavor text submissions for [Copper Spider]. The first question I asked was why [Memnarch](#) bothered to create big spiders when he had the Myr and [Levelers](#) to cull the sentient creature population. I then noticed that there were very few "normal" creature types in *Mirrodin*block. So here is what I reasoned in my first submission:

*"The [cardname]s have gone a long way towards fixing Mirrodin's rat problem. And the bat, wolf, imp, and bird problems too."*

See? Sometimes I make jokes. Then again, this one didn't make it, so there you go.



I eventually noticed [Whispersilk Cloak](#) from *Darksteel*. I don't know why I noticed it, but it struck me funny. Where does the whispersilk come from to make the cloak if everything on the world is metal? Voila. My second submission tried to explain *Mirrodin's* whispersilk supply and is now the card's flavor text.

I'm a little sad that this revelation came so late in my *Fifth Dawn* experience, because it would have been fun to look for more of these creative gaps across the three sets and decide that my personal mission was to fill them. I'm sure that lots of these sorts of flavorful puzzles exist to solve in almost every **Magic** block, and often within-set. Ah FlavOracle, we barely knew thee.

## Back Into My Writing Hole

Wow, who knew I had so much to say about names and flavor text? Oh, that's right. I'm trapped in a room alone with an unfinished novel and watching my once-respectable name fade to anonymity. I would write twenty pages on Mark's new twins if they let me.

Hopefully you found some interesting nuggets amidst my incessant rambling. Post some thoughts on the Message Boards about whether you would like to see more names and/or flavor text articles during the Kamigawa block, because goodness knows I have more to say. In the upcoming sets, Brandon actually let me get involved in **Magic** lore-building, so if possible my enthusiasm has only swelled.

May *Fifth Dawn* give your theme decks many tools,

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**Jay's full *Fifth Dawn* credits:**

Card names: Abuna's Chant; Battered Golem; Blind Creeper; Bringer of the Black Dawn; Bringer of the Blue Dawn; Bringer of the Green Dawn; Bringer of the Red Dawn; Bringer of the White Dawn; Conjurer's Bauble; Ebon Drake; Fist of Suns; Goblin Brawler; Grafted Wargear; Guardian Idol; Ion Storm; Lantern of Insight; Leonin Squire; Neurok Stealthsuit; Possessed Portal; Retaliate; Skyhunter Prowler; Steelshaper's Gift; Suncrusher; Tel-Jilad Justice; Fill with Fright; Joiner Adept; Roar of Reclamation.

Flavor text: Arachnoid; Auriok Windwalker; Blind Creeper; Channel the Suns; Circle of Protection: Artifacts; Devour in Shadow; Fold into AEther; Gemstone Array; Loxodon Anchoret; Moriok Rigger; Night's Whisper; Retaliate; Roar of Reclamation; Skyhunter Skirmisher; Viridian Lorebearers.