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This week, the site has been focusing on “Japan” in one way or another. Since my column is about **Magic** development and we are in the middle of a Japanese-flavored block, it makes sense for me to talk about how development strove to imbue *Champions* and *Betrayers of Kamigawa* with a proper Japanese feel.

That job (luckily) did not fall on the shoulders of those you may know as traditional **Magic** developers—guys like Brian Schneider, Henry Stern, Matt Place, and myself. Instead, another group of developers—the **Magic** creative team—turned our mundane cards into magnificent and evocative Japanese showcases. Brady Dommermuth spearheaded the creative movement behind the *Kamigawa* block (you can read about it in his article “A Series of Fortunate Events: Kamigawa World Design”). I sat down with him for a refresher course on how it all came together, and what new creative twists were in *Betrayers*.

By Any Other Name



One aspect that makes the *Kamigawa* block stand out from previous **Magic** sets is the Asian-sounding names on many of the cards, like “Kusari-Gama,” “Brothers Yamazaki,” and “Isao, Enlightened Bushi.” According to Brady, earlier plans for card names were far more grandiose.

“Originally, we were going to put card names in normal English, then put the anglicized Japanese names below them, almost like subtitles.” For example, a card might be called “Fearsome Ogre,” but it would have a second, smaller name line underneath it with its Japanese title, “O-Bakemono.” While such a plan would certainly thoroughly convey the Japanese theme of the set, the card real estate necessary to implement it was a sticking point. Creative pulled back a bit, and tried using the theoretical subtype line a little more sparingly.

“We almost gave a lot of the legends really long titles that would have taken two lines,” said Brady. “Ryusei, the Falling Star would have been something like ‘Ryusei, the Falling Star, Lord of the Sokenzan Heights’” with the second half of the name going on a second name line. The idea was to instill some grandiosity, splendor, and history into the card names themselves, but names that long were tough for the rest of R&D to swallow.

Once Brady and the rest of the creative team were committed to the tried-and-true single name line on the cards, Brady tried to squeeze as many Japanese words into card titles as he could.

“I deliberately start high,” he said, referring to the placeholder names he gives to each card to help steer the artists in the right direction. “Japanese seems like an easy language to pronounce... where every word is almost like a series of mono-syllabic bits. I toyed with the idea of getting the word ‘kishinsuhaisha’—‘demon servant’—on a card, claiming that it wasn’t that hard to say. But no one believed me.” Brady’s ambitious naming scheme was pushed back upon from many directions. “The super-high-concept version of any set gets diluted naturally during normal processes. Stuff I want to use gets rejected by the naming team, flavor text writers don’t use it, editors won’t tolerate it...” The regular R&D playtesters will often comment on card names that seem jarring to them as well; I can remember complaining about a card called “Ekbibgyogami Swarm,” which was eventually changed to something my unrefined American larynx could manage more easily.

The very name of the plane itself—Kamigawa—was born from pronunciation difficulties. “The original name was 'Inreikai,’” Brady explained. “The *reikai* is the 'spirit force,' and the prefix *in-* means 'dark' or 'shadow.' Our Japanese partners loved that name—it was very cool to them—but English-speakers really struggled with it. Our backup name was 'Kamigawa,' which means 'spirit river' or 'river of the gods.' Not as cool to the Japanese.”

World Details

So if the plane is named after a river, where is this magical river? “It doesn't really show up on cards much,” Brady lamented. “The river started out very literally from a creative standpoint. It was supposed to be very important in the world—it is the source of the Kamitaki Falls that flow around the Minamo School. But because it doesn't show up very often, 'river of the gods' became more figurative in the way the set is perceived.” He was quick to point out the *Betrayers* card *Slumbering Tora* as having the Kamigawa river in its art.



Slumbering Tora, Art by Doug Chaffee

One prominent feature of the world of Kamigawa is its Legendary Dragon Spirits, headlined by the fearsome Kokusho, the Evening Star. These dragons proved difficult to tackle creatively. “Magic's dragons are typically red,” explained Brady, “chaos, and passion, and fire. But Japanese dragons are typically blue; they're wise, they can change shape, they're the gods of rivers and seas. We weren't sure where we were supposed to put dragons in this world, but by making them legendary, we had a good reason to break the rules and put them in every color. Now they each embody one aspect of each color above all others.”

What about the artifacts in *Kamigawa*? If you remember back to the artifacts in *Mirrodin*, they were crazy contraptions built for warfare—Goblin Cannon, Spellbombs, Soul Foundry. In *Kamigawa*, we get things like a Journeyer's Kite, Hair-Strung Koto, and Ornate Kanzashi. What gives? Brady chuckled. “The introduction of 'equipment' complicates things. Most of the cool things from Japanese history and folklore that want to be artifacts are weapons, and those need to be equipment. But there weren't enough equipment cards in the set to use all the cool ideas, so I had to come up with other stuff, like the kite. I wanted to show the trappings of feudal Japan that most players would recognize. But there is a line we wouldn't cross,” he assured me, “Brandon [Bozzi, another member of the creative team] wouldn't let me do a kimono card. He said, 'No robes on cards.’”

Some of the artifacts in the block do have some religious significance, Brady pointed out. The Shaku and the Gohei are both trappings of Shinto (as are special ropes called "shimenawa," visible in the art for Boseiju, Who Shelters All). Each of these artifacts is decorated with nusa paper, which is used by Shinto priests to designate the presence of kami.

Betrayers Card Notes

For the last bit of my discussion with Brady, I asked him for some creative tidbits on some of the cards from *Betrayers*. His replies are in quotes below.

The Baku – "Baku are in Japanese folklore; they're benevolent dream-guardians. They are chimeric creatures with aspects of lions and elephants, and they turn your nightmares into good fortune by devouring the bad parts. In our story, because they're spirits, they turn hostile towards the material world once the war begins, becoming nightmarish creatures themselves. As a note, I got the idea for the art concept from the **Dungeons & Dragons** monster Intellect Devourer. It's just a brain on lion's legs, so for the baku I just replaced 'brain' with 'a mass of candles' or 'a pile of skulls.'"



Art by Donato Giancola

Kentaro, the Smiling Cat – "This art was supposed to be used on Toshiro Umezawa [who was originally in *Champions*]. But Umezawa got moved [to *Betrayers*], and because Donato [Giancola] wasn't doing the packaging images for *Betrayers*, we had to get new art." All the 'packaging images' for any particular set (that means the card art that also appears on the booster display box, the theme deck display box, and the tournament pack display box) are done by the same artist. John Bolton did the packaging images for *Champions* (Horobi, Uyo, Shisato, and Konda). Umezawa was in that set originally, but wasn't slated to be used on packaging. When he moved to *Betrayers*, he

became one of the central cards of that set, and the creative and brand teams wanted to use him on the packaging. The problem was, Donato painted it, and Chris Moeller was slated to do the packaging

images for *Betrayers*. So Donato's Umezawa was moved to Kentaro, and Moeller painted a new Umezawa.

Goryo's Vengeance – Who is this Goryo person? Actually, he's not a person at all. "Goryo, or 'onryo,' means 'angry spirits.' Specifically, those that died but did not have rites performed to let them leave the world. That Sarah Michelle Gellar movie 'The Grudge' is about goryo—angry spirits of the unsettled dead. It's actually a remake of a Japanese horror movie from a year earlier called Ju-On."

Final Judgment – That seems to be a spirit invoking his wrath in the art, yet the card isn't Arcane. What's going on? "Yes, the card isn't arcane, but that particular plot point (see **Magic** Arcana for an explanation) was too good not to use on the card. The spirit pictured is the O-Kagachi—the kami that embodies the difference and the veil between the spirit world and the material world. So there's some justification for it not being Arcane; when the O-Kagachi is around, things just go haywire." (In Brady's defense, the creative team did ask development if Final Judgment could be Arcane, but their request was denied, mainly due to potential interactions with Hikari, Twilight Guardian.)

The Flippers – Many people believe these cards represent humans "betraying" their own side and becoming spirits. "That's not what's happening. The material-world creatures are vessels; the kami are bursting out of them. They aren't transforming; the kami are already inside them. On some of the cards like Cunning Bandit, the presence of the kami within the human greatly influences the human's behavior—the kami corrupt."

That's it for now. Many thanks to Brady, and I hope you enjoyed this look into the other side of **Magic** development.

Last Week's Poll:

How did this article make you feel?		
Cautiously optimistic.	4159	40.2%
I'm smiling!	3271	31.6%
Wary and/or confused.	1206	11.6%
Angry!	931	9.0%
Somewhat annoyed.	785	7.6%
Total	10352	100.0%

Remember to tune in on March 1st for the official Banned and Restricted List announcement.

This Week's Poll:

How hard to pronounce do you consider card names in the *Kamigawa* block?

- Very difficult to pronounce
- Somewhat difficult to pronounce
- Not difficult to pronounce

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