

All about that little 2" x 1.5" box

The Big Deal About Little Pictures

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A few weeks back, Mark Rosewater introduced the Creative Team in his article, "[Ninjas & Pirates & Myrs... Oh My!](#)" Now that my Creative Team cohorts and I are in the public eye, we thought it would be interesting to rear our ugly heads from time to time with stories and information on Creative Team issues like world building, card conceiving, flavor text, style guides, art direction, and silly putty. Once I shed my green horns I'll bust into these subjects, but for now let's dive into a subject with which I have had experience long before I donned my Wizard's cap. To kick off the Creative Team babble I have chosen to write about **Magic** art.

The subject of **Magic** art is vast. It's a fat can of Wurms. For the purposes of this article, I'm going to pare it down to one little thing that influences **Magic** art more than anything else I can think of; the 2" x 1.5" box. "What is this tiny quadrilateral?" you ask. It is the little place on your **Magic** cards where the art lives. "And why is it a big deal?" Well, that one takes a little more explanation.



I am going to illuminate for you the ways in which the 2" x 1.5" box (which we will call the "Little Box" from here on,) enforces its will on **Magic** artists. Hopefully, this will give you a new perspective when you look at your favorite (and not so favorite) cards. It will also give you some insight into what artists think about when they work. You may also start to see patterns in which artists regularly befriend the Little Box, or attempt to defy its omnipotent might. I am going to give you the tools to go beyond just saying "Hey, this one looks cool!" to also think to yourself, "and this is what makes it look cool."

Just to be clear, we're not getting into any discussion about good art versus bad art. That's an icy path upon which I am not willing to tread. Instead, I am going to lay out some factors that can *lead to* successful **Magic** art. All of the factors that I am going to cite are related to our pal, the Little Box.

In order to create a successful image with such a small space in which to work, **Magic** artists can work their wonders in one of two ways. We will call them "shoehorn" techniques, because they are ways to help jam stuff into a confining space. The first way is to put less stuff in the Little Box. The second is to show more stuff, but focus in on the major elements. Some say there is even a secret third technique...

This Card's Not Big Enough For The Two of Us

For now, let's focus on the first of the shoehorn techniques. In order to maximize an illustration's punch to inch ratio, an artist may choose to depict their vision into the most minimal form. Often, the results are simple, iconic compositions. "Iconic" is just a term that describes an image dominated by one easy-to-distinguish character or element. In most cases, these are found on **Magic's** creature cards, with the iconic element being, of course, the creature. Adding in extra stuff clutters up the little image and can draw your attention from the iconic character.



Here are three great examples of iconic images. The Little Box is absolutely dominated by the focal characters, with little or no elements in competition for the limelight. [Visara](#) could have easily been shown with the petrified bodies of her foes lying about her, but that just loads up the little box with people who want to steal your attention. [Visara](#) is a very selfish gorgon and she wants your eyes on her. [Elvish Berserker](#) could have been painted mid-hack, with his fleeing enemies all about, but no! He, too, craves your attention. He does not spend hours at the gym pumping up those pecs for you to look at his enemies. The same goes for [Lord of the Undead](#). He asked Brom to paint him the way the old Dutch masters used to paint noblemen – lookin' dandy, all gussied up – and with no zombies hanging around. Truly iconic characters demand your attention in this way. They're like nobles, or pampered Hollywood actors. They recognize that the Little Box is not quite as grand as, say, a movie poster or a life-size painting by an old Dutch master. Of course, **Magic** artists are all too happy to oblige. They realize that the most economical use of the Little Box is to fill it up with a bunch of one thing and little else.

One is the Loneliest Number

Sometimes an artist just cannot cut out all the extra characters and background. To tell a story, artists need supporting casts and sets and lighting and all that. To jam all of that into the Little Box – now that requires shoehorn technique #2. This technique is used most often, since **Magic** illustrations are often charged with telling the story of the card.



Let's take a look at the two illustrations for [Dwarven Demolition Team](#). The first one does not employ any of the three techniques, choosing instead to depict multiple elements, each competing with the other for attention. I have added crosshairs to the image to show where it wants your attention to go. In this case, it wants you to look at the explosion and the hurtling dwarf and the two ear-pluggers all at the same time. This illustration is a bit too jumbled to really "pop," despite the explosion. Now check out Kev's new-fangled Team. One focal dwarf, one set of crosshairs. The initial pop is there – BAM! Cool looking dwarf. Kev has managed to depict a focal character *and* a supporting cast *and* a specific background, all in a 2 inch space. *How* he does this is a matter that will be addressed a little later.

I, too, have had experience with the whittling knife. There have been plenty of times when I received an art description that asked for more stuff than the Little Box could comfortably handle. [Extract](#), for example, was supposed to show a wizard blasting another guy in the head with a brainwasher ray. In this case, the characters are subordinate to the spell effect, so why would I waste precious space in the Little Box on two insignificant people? As you can see, I zoomed in on the unfortunate victim's newly emptied skull, and just hinted at the wizard doing the emptying. There are still 3 elements at work here; the dominant brain extraction, a sub-dominant brainwashed elf, and a subordinate wizard, but the focus is definitely on the brain extraction.



Flip through your binders, it's quite easy to find other **Magic** illustrations that maximize the Little Box by focusing on one particular element. It is easy because this technique works.

Yes, But HOW does it work?

If a simple, single character composition cannot be used, things can be done to keep the Little Box from looking too cluttered. Let us first have a little primer on the concept of contrast.



The above image shows a row of mana symbols with extremely low contrast. This means that the mana symbols and the colored boxes they are in have nearly no difference in value (light to dark) or color saturation (dull to bright.) An object with low contrast of color or value tends to recede and draw less attention to itself.



This row of mana symbols is shown in extreme contrast. The blue mana symbol is a good example of color contrast – bright blue on colorless gray. The white mana symbol shows value contrast – light

yellow on dark purple. The black one is *the* example of contrast – darkest and colorless black on light and bright yellow. Street signs are made this way for a reason. A deer crossing sign has to draw your attention away from the Starbucks on the left and the...Starbucks on your right. Greatest contrast asserts itself visually in any scene, from the intersection down the street to the tiny little magic illustration.

When multiple elements compete for attention in the Little Box, skilled handling of contrast is needed to separate focus from background. Use of subtlety and low contrast in background imagery allows an artist to depict details without having them overshadow important focal elements.



A great example of this is RK Post's [Avatar of Woe](#). The woe-stricken chumps in the background are complete in their detail, but have no darks and almost no color. Their low-contrast treatment allows the avatar to steal the show. She has value contrast from the black of her dress to the light pink of her skin and color contrast from colorless black to the saturated blue of her sash. Randy has handled contrast in a way that draws our attention to the main character while still maintaining a fully developed background. If Randy had painted the background figures in full color and light-to-dark value, the illustration would have been a jumble of things competing for your attention, and quite hard to make out at just 2 inches wide.

In addition to the focus it gives an image, contrast manipulation can also create a great sense of atmosphere. In Ron Spears's [Overwhelming Instinct](#), contrast decreases as creatures get farther away, both separating foreground from background and creating the look of space and rising

dust between [Kamah!](#) and the wurms.

[Okiba-gang Shinobi](#), [Cartographer](#), and [Seize the Day](#) are also good examples of focus attained through contrast. Take a peek back up at [Dwarven Demolition Team](#) and [Extract](#). Each of these illustrations also pushes back their non-focal elements by reducing their contrast. Take a look back through your cards - you will see contrast manipulation in action all over the place. It is absolutely essential in working within the Little Box's rigorous confines.

What's Your "Thing?"

As if overcoming the size of the Little Box was not enough, **Magic** art also needs to overcome *thereason* why it is small. It is small because **Magic** cards are meant to be used in groups of many, whether in play on a table, in binders, or tall stacks. In order to be recognized among scads of others, many **Magic** illustrations use a grabber to get your attention *right now*. "Thing" is the word I use to describe this grabber. It's the angle an artist takes on a particular piece that may be recognized without close inspection of the card. Examples of "things" are bold color, intricate pattern, unique viewpoint, in-your-face action, unique color choices, etc. This gives a **Magic** card, (a wizard, for example) a chance to immediately distinguish itself from other wizard cards.



[Nightshade Seer](#)'s "thing" is its colorful, glasslike background. [Keeper of the Dead](#)'s "thing" is its dark gothic symmetry, while [Echo Tracer](#)'s thing is the geometric treatment of the background and the wizard's spell effect. Each is a great illustration of a wizard that has an immediate impact different from the others. These "things" give our eyes something to latch onto while we're breezing through the trade binder or flipping through an opponent's deck after playing [Bribery](#). Because the images are so small, artists cannot rely on details to grab a viewer's attention.

I encourage you to flip through your cards and try to identify the "thing" on each one. Don't linger on a card, trying to figure out what the thing is – if it takes longer than a moment, there may not be a "thing." Having no "thing" does not preclude a **Magic** card from being good, it just makes it harder for that card to be recognized amongst the masses. These are the cards that may be an acquired taste, the hidden gems that you notice when your opponent is thinking too long and you have nothing to do but stare at the cards in your hand.

Magic is like a big night club – if the cards want to get your attention, they have to [work out](#) like fiends, wear [funny clothes](#), or have a [pierced chin](#)! Most often, however, they just roll with colors that say, "Hey, here I am!"

"Hey, here I am!"

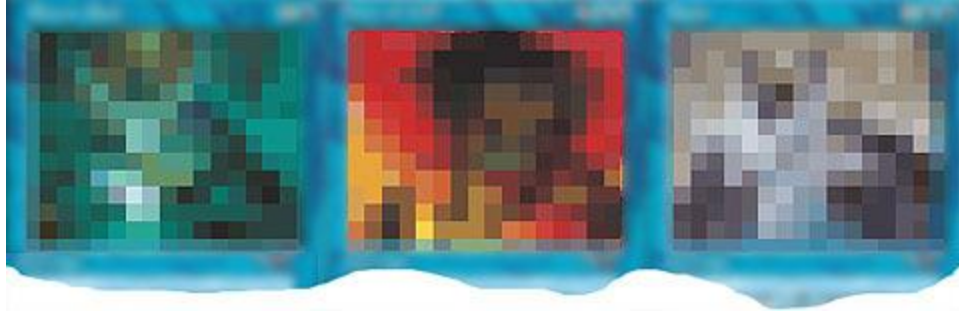
Sometimes we take for granted that cards have art on them, but that art has a purpose beyond providing eye candy. More than anything else, the art is there to *identify* the card it is on. The playtest cards we use here at Wizards have no art, and card frames that are mostly covered by a white sticker. It's hard to keep tabs on all the cards that are out when they all look the same.



An illustration's colors, in connection to the color of the card frame, helps players immediately differentiate one card from another when they are strewn out in play. Designing to the card frame is a way for artists to expand their visual statement beyond the confines of the Little Box and out to the edges of the card. Making a color statement this way helps a **Magic** card say, "Hey, here I am!" [Knights of Thorn](#) was the first card to yell at me in this way. That crazy red-faced man and his blue shoulder pads really stood out among the other white cards. This attention to color is important because artists are not working with enough square inches to have the likeness of their knights identify them. If we were talking about movie poster art, color would have less to do with identification than accurate rendering of Tom Cruise's face

(with his crooked teeth secretly straightened by the artist.) Thus, the Tom Cruise racecar movie poster is set apart from the Stallone racing movie poster.

I defiantly ripped off the [Knights of Thorn](#) angle when I painted [Muzzle](#) – another white card dominated by a red element. (OK, they asked me to paint the red wolf, but I defiantly made it a really big red wolf ;)



Force of Will is another great example of this, using the colors normally associated with red cards on - gasp!- a blue card. For those of you who have had your plans bombed by Force of Will, you probably knew immediately which of the blurred blue cards above is the bomb. When that fiery blue card hits the table, you know immediately that your (insert countered spell here) is doomed. The fact that the card is recognizable even when blurred proves the great impact of color, a tool that comes in quite handy when an illustration has to be so small. Just for fun, I'll throw at you examples from the other 3 colors: Doug Gregory's [Persecute](#) is a black card dominated by a fresh, springy periwinkle (one of my all-time faves.) [Desperate Ritual](#) is a red card with sweet, candy-like blues and violets. The old school favorite [Llanowar Elves](#) is an unmistakable green card with its stark yellows, pinks, and blacks.

The Arm and Squint Test

The Arm & Squint test is a little invention of my own. It refers to the lengths at which **Magic** art is viewed. An illustration that passes the Arm & Squint test looks cool from *BOTH* arm's length as well as up really, really close. This is important to little works like **Magic** art because they are most often seen from arm's length. That's when the iconic images, contrast manipulation, and "thing" kick in. Take a look at [Visara](#) again. She looks pretty darn cool from arm's length. But is there really all that much to squint at? I give her a B- in the A&S test. Conversely, the original [Dwarven Demolition Team](#) fails the Arm test, but passes the Squint test with its blasted mountain and funny little panicking dwarves.



[Somnophore](#) (another one of my all-time faves), on the other hand, packs immediate punch *AND* holds up when we bury our noses in it. From arm's length, it boasts a unique palette of punchy color. As we squint at it, we see a wonderfully crazy creature and the story of his bubbling brews that induce unnatural slumber. How cool is that! A+. Many cards have loaded their guns with "thing" and pack a lot of immediate pop, while others are replete with tasty detail, but do not do enough with the shoehorn techniques to look great from the other side of the game table. Those that pass the Arm & Squint test are most likely doing all of the things that make little art have big success. Here are some cards that I think ace the test: [Angelic Shield](#), [Avatar of Hope](#) (Post), [Thermal Glider](#), [Dauthi Cutthroat](#), [Rancor](#), [Pacifism](#) (Bliss), [Sailmonger](#), [Possessed Centaur](#), [Gloomdrifter](#), [Sanctum Guardian](#), and the list goes on.

A Secret Shoehorn Technique?

The third shoehorn technique is secret and most rare. It is to jam the Little Box with loads of stuff because the card is called " of Chaos" and the artist *means* to show a chaotic mess. It is, however, so rare that this is all the pub it gets. If you want to find examples of this, search [Gatherer](#) for "[Chaos](#)" or maybe even "[Ron Spencer](#)."

It's Not Just Artsy Blather

These are not just ethereal, artsy topics that only snooty aesthetes talk about. We here on the Creative Team swing these concepts all the time. It is our job to suggest whittling out clutter when we see a busy **Magic** sketch. It's our duty to suggest to the artists that they use some manipulation of contrast or color so the right characters receive focus on the cards. In fact, just last night a **Magic** painting arrived in which the focal creature was obscured by low contrast and pale color, while another figure in the image had full lights and darks as well as bright color. Those of us who saw it agreed that there were problems. So Jeremy will talk just this sort of talk with the artist (though he probably won't be using words like "shoehorn" or "little box") and the illustration will come back to us gleaming with "thing" and focus.

Just the Tip of the Iceberg

3000 words and counting, all on just a small fraction of one of the subjects relating only to the top half of a **Magic** card. If you've enjoyed this little glimpse into the vast world of the Creative Team, and you're interested in other areas of our realm, voice your opinions and suggestions on the [message boards](#). There is still so much left to be explored – but not until next time. The mounting word count ends here. Go forth, crack into your binders, and revisit **Magic** art with a new appreciation of its wonderful smallness.