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The Magic Style Guide (Part 1)

Matt Cavotta
Taste the Magic
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One cool thing about artists is that they have a seemingly psychic link to one another. When charged with illustrating or writing about characters, creatures, and places they almost unerringly come to the same ingenious results! Take a look at these four **Magic** card illustrations- each one depicting the dastardly morph-master Ixidor.



In each of these illustrations Ixidor is depicted as a rakish dreadlocked mage. Clearly we can see how all great artists think alike. Look again, even the long purplish coat is the same! All great artists think alike. (Have I lost you yet? If not, reread the paragraph above with the following subtle perspective: This is the opposite of true.)

The truth is, artists by nature look to make creations that diverge from those of other artists. They try to put their own slant on whatever it is they are creating. Give 4 artists the same exact project and they will all produce distinctly different results. So how, then, did Ixidor come out looking so consistent? The answer is the **Magic** Style Guide.

The News and the Trues

One of **Magic's** greatest characteristics is its ability to recreate itself with each new set. Given the constant of change, and artists' tendency to diverge, we need a way to convey to people who work on **Magic** what the new stuff (story, characters, setting, etc) is, as well as what the constants are (color pie, card types, art dimensions, brand ideals, etc.) The Style Guides are crucial in communicating a unified vision for a **Magic** set. With each new set a document is compiled that contains all of this (and more) information that is pertinent to that setting. We are going to delve into the deep dark crevices of this document. (I know how you all love to delve.) There's so much stuff to explore that I am breaking it up into two separate articles. The first one, today's, will look closely at the introductory section to the style guide. It addresses the things in **Magic** that do not change (much) from set to set. Next week we'll focus on the part that deals with setting-specific stuff like storyline info and style guide illustrations for characters, races, costuming, and settings.

I am sure there are some of you out there grumbling about how we shouldn't use a style guide, that it creates homogeneity in the look and feel of **Magic**. That topic is an article unto itself as well. For today, I'd suggest that you put the scattered grumbles on the back burner and plow forth with the following in mind: the Style Guide is absolutely necessary to the health and longevity of **Magic** and it's here to stay for the foreseeable future. (If nothing else, these two articles will at least let you see exactly where we're coming from, even if you personally disagree.)

Icing the Entire Cake

Before we start digging in, let's take a quick look at the history of the Style Guide. We started using a style guide while working on the *Tempest* block. Whole set vision began long before that with *Arabian Nights*, but their "style guide" was a pre-existing story to which they could refer. No actual document was necessary. *Ice Age* and *Mirage* had block ideas, but they were not thoroughly applied. While *Ice Age* clearly had "cold" and old Norse sounding words in its pocket, this was not communicated across the board. *Ice Age* could have really used a style guide.

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RULES



All of these wildly differing illustrations are of Balduvians from *Ice Age* block. Without the help of a style guide, we must draw from this motley crew that either: A) Balduvia is both *arctic* and *fiery* and its people all look different from each other, or: B) artists are in fact *not* psychic and all came up with differing views on what Balduvia and its denizens were like during the *Ice Age*. It's altogether possible that some artists did not even know they were illustrating characters and scenes set during an *Ice Age*. This is where a Style Guide saves the day. It keeps an artist from depicting a tan, naked shaman surrounded by heat and flame during a time of extreme lack of heat and extreme need for clothing. Anyway, the nearly nude shaman, and others like him, showed us the light. *Mirage* block still went forward without a style guide, but the lesson was learned and soon the Style Guide would take shape for the Rath Cycle.

So now that we know we need a style guide, how do we make one? Once the entire **Magic** R&D team settles on an angle (artifact-metal world, Japan-inspired world, guild-dominated city world, etc.) the creative team sets about gathering together the pieces of the Style Guide puzzle.

Story. The first thing that's rounded up is some general story and setting info. This points us to when, where and how this set will fit into the **Magic** multiverse and the storylines that already exist. From this we can extrapolate a rough list of possible prevalent races, characters, and locations. These things are communicated to the art director, who processes it and dispenses it to a team of assembled concept artists.

Concept Art. For three weeks a team of artists works with the Creative Team on-site. The team usually consists of 3-6 artists, but not all of them also illustrate **Magic** card art. There was a time when these artists were all on staff here, and there was also a time when there were no staff artists and the team was flown in from around the world. Today we have a bit of both, with one artist on staff (Jeremy Jarvis) and additional artists brought in when necessary.

Once they're in, it's drawing, drawing and redrawing until the Creative Team identifies the creations that will be used or further developed. Then they draw some more. From the piles and piles of stuff that is created the real gems are pulled. Then the artists will head back to their studios to really flesh out the important characters and settings in full color.

Brand Info. Important information about **Magic's** audience, goals, and vision is pulled together along with info and tips from the art director. This stuff rarely changes, and only needs attention from time to time.

The drawings, story material, and brand and art direction are compiled, ordered, and bound up in a happy bundle. For a long time the Style Guide was printed out and sent to each recipient. After many *many* sets worth of 50+ page documents being sent to as many as 50 different people, Wizards chose to spare the trees and compile the Guides digitally. Now an Adobe Acrobat file is sent to artists, writers, card designers and developers, and the **Magic** Brand team. This way, all of the peeps involved with shaping the look and feel of a particular set are all on the same page, and trees everywhere rejoice.

Peek Inside the Guide

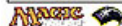
To the right is a sample Style Guide cover. This one was for the set that became "*Champions of Kamigawa*".

Let's crack the cover and see how the Style Guide's content kicks off. The beginning sections are geared toward magic artists. Much of this will seem like no news to you, as it is no news to the designers, developers, and the **Magic** Brand team.

But, each set brings many new artists and writers into the fold for whom all of this information will be new and crucial.

MAGIC'S ATTITUDE

Magic is a head-to-head battle of wits in which two spellcasting warriors fight to the death with magic and armies of bad-ass



creatures. Every card illustration should work in that context: active, aggressive, cool, wicked, “edgy.” The word “magepunk” works for us. **Remember, your audience is BOYS 14 and up**

I hope this is not offensive to the female magic fans out there. Mostly, this is just to give the artists a barometer on what the majority of their audience is like. As you’ll see later, we are definitely sensitive to women and how they may feel as players and how they are represented on cards.

ILLUSTRATIONS FOR MAGIC SERVE 3 MAIN PURPOSES

1. Set the mood and create the world. In other words, make **Magic** visually cool.
2. Keep the game fresh. That’s why we change the setting every year.
3. *Reflect what the card does and help players distinguish cards from each other.*

Your illustrations will be more successful, more popular, and less likely to be rejected if you understand **Magic**. We encourage you to learn how to play and to play periodically to keep your game knowledge current. It’s the only way to really understand the relationship between illustrations and gameplay.

This one is a doozy. I take it to heart with every single magic illustration I do, and I know most of my paint-pushing cohorts do the same. I know plenty of magic artists who have learned to play. In some cases, like my own, playing came first. Others learned to play for just this reason. It can never hurt to know more about your product and its audience.

CARD TYPES

Magic has 6 card types. Each has very specific illustration requirements.

Creature Cards

- Each creature card represents a creature you can summon to fight for you.
- The art description will sometimes refer you to this style guide. When it does, use the illustrations in the style guide as a basis for the creature’s look and feel. But feel free to create your own interpretation of what’s in the style guide. Don’t just copy what’s in the style guide detail for detail—unless it’s an iconic creature or character.
- Sometimes a creature card will represent a group of creatures. In these cases, it’s usually a good idea to make one of them the focal point and put the others in the background (or even just hint at them).
Rule: If your creature illustration contains more than one creature or person, it should be crystal clear which one the card represents.
Rule: If a creature doesn’t have the flying ability, it can’t have wings and can’t be shown in flight. If it does have the flying ability, it must be shown in flight or obviously able to fly somehow.

Land Cards

- Wizards connect to lands so they can draw magical energy from them (mana). Each land is like a self-recharging battery of magical energy.
- Players see land cards more often than any other cards. They define Magic’s look and feel more than any other card.
- There are 5 basic land types: plains (white), islands (blue), swamps (black), mountains (red), and forests (green). We try to make each of the 5 land types look different every year, so check the style guide.
- Generally, illustrations for land cards should be landscapes.
- Sometimes you’ll get a *nonbasic* land card that represents a particular location or place. These are exceptions to the landscape rule.
Rule: Don’t show prominent buildings, creatures, or people in land illustrations unless the art description specifically asks for them. You can sometimes show things in the distant background, though

Disclaimer: This rule does not apply in the *Ravnica* block. In fact, the rule pretty much works in reverse. Based on what I have seen of the land art in *Ravnica*, this rule was probably deleted from the Style Guide before it went out.

Artifact and Artifact Creature Cards

- These cards represent magical objects or magically created creatures.
- Artifact illustrations should focus on the object or artificial creature that the card represents.
- Artifacts don’t belong to any of the 5 **Magic** colors. They’re “neutral.”
- Avoid making things look high-tech or sci-fi. **Magic** stretches the definition of “fantasy,” but there are limits.



Instants, Sorceries, Enchantments

- These cards represent spells you can cast. They do so many different things that you can’t really generalize about them.
- The focus of an instant, sorcery, or enchantment should be the action of the spell, not a creature or object.
- If the art description for an instant or sorcery refers you to the style guide, you have less room for interpretation than you do with creature cards. That’s because if a spell concept is important enough to be in the style guide, it means we’re trying to do something out of the ordinary.

PACKAGING ART

- If you’re assigned a card whose illustration will be used on packaging, special rules apply.



- Take extra care to make the illustration successful and high-impact. Packaging images get a lot of exposure and appear on the best cards. It's vital that they be your best work.
- The major element or subject of a packaging illustration must be easily removable from its background.
- Your illustration might be cropped for the card or for a display box. Use that to your advantage.

The following is from an interesting page in the Style Guide. Strangely, it's printed in tiny type, though its message carries some serious weight:

GENERAL GUIDELINES

- Remember that your illustration will be seen in a 2-inch square. Simple compositions with lots of contrast work best.
- Don't let the background compete with the foreground.
- Don't use every crayon in the box. At card size, illustrations with too many colors look busy or muddy.

This may not seem like a big deal, but there's a lot to be said on this subject. In fact, it already has been. You can read all about it in "[A Big Deal About Little Pictures.](#)" Its writing is rough, the author a bit of a nob, and the humor is a dud- but the ideas have merit. Check it out.



- Let **Magic's** 5 colors guide your choices (see p. 7). If you're new to **Magic**, the colors are more confining than you think. Those of you who are familiar with the colors will find that there is plenty of room for innovation within the spirit of each color..
- Make an effort to illustrate a variety of races, genders, ages, and body types.
- Feel free to paint beautiful women, as long as they're shown kicking ass. No damsels in distress. No ridiculously exaggerated breasts. No nudity.

This stuff is taken seriously by the Brand and Creative Teams. **Magic** means to rise above the old school notion that male knights save female princesses from ogres and dragons. The Style Guide is a great place to start planting the seed of strong, heroic, butt-kicking female characters.

- Don't use real-world letters or symbols. This includes religious symbols such as crosses and ankhs.
- Keep gore at a PG-13 level.
- Because we sell **Magic** cards in China, please avoid prominently representing human skulls or full skeletons.
- Despite all the do's and don'ts, **we want you to have fun!** If you want to experiment or bend a rule, just run your idea by the art director.

Again, this may not seem like big-deal stuff, but there's something in here that, in my opinion, is absolutely crucial to the longevity of **Magic**. "...we want you to have fun!" When the creators of the game are having a hoot, it will show in the cards. In true Vorthos fashion, I say that this game is not only supposed to be fun *to play*.

The next page is as big and fat as any other page in any of the Style Guides. Many of you will recognize it immediately. Not only has it spawned a hundred-thousand conversations on message boards and in gaming rooms, it also fits quite nicely into TTM's whole theme of *flavor*. Take a bite, it's our favorite- the **COLOR PIE!**



This Color Pie may, upon scrutiny, seem a little different than you may have expected. This one leaves out all the stuff about which colors get which abilities and which has the fat and which has the library manipulation. This is not the time to get into where the pie is cut and how strictly it should be applied to cards. Instead, for this article, let's stick to how it applies to the Style Guide. This Pie shows the philosophies of each color. From these philosophies, artists, writers, and designers can tailor their creations to fit within the all-important **Magic** color system. (I find it very Vorthosian that red's "Impulse" and "Chaos" are the only words written bottoms out. Sure, it could have been a mistake, but something tells me the graphic designer had a little red streak herself.)

The Style Guide then goes into further detail about the colors:

White

Keywords: Order, Law, Healing, Light

- White loves systems of law and order. Cities and castles are often white, for example, because you need law and order to build and maintain a city.
- White is *not* "good." Black is not "evil." There's good and evil in every color.
- At its best, white is just and protective. At its worst, white is fascist and absolute.

Blue

Keywords: Knowledge, Logic, Deceit, Air

- Blue loves trickery and manipulation. Blue magic is sneaky, analytical, clever.
- At its best, blue is smart and progressive. At its worst, blue is treacherous and cold.

Black

Keywords: Self-Serving, Power-Hungry, Death, Darkness

- Black wants all the power for itself, regardless of the cost. Black magic is parasitic and corrupting.
- At its best, black is ambitious and unashamed. At its worst, black is enslaving and devouring.

Red

Keywords: Freedom, Action, Emotion, Fire

- Red is all about impulse and instant gratification. When red feels something, it acts on that emotion immediately.
- At its best, red is passionate and decisive. At its worst, red is destructive and short-sighted.

Green

Keywords: Growth, Nature, Adaptation, Life

- Green wants everything to be part of the natural order. Hunt, kill, eat, mate, sleep—to green, that's all there is and all there should be.
- At its best, green is instinctual and growth-centered. At its worst, green is vicious and unthinking.



When I wrote earlier about the things in **Magic** that remained constant, and were important to maintain across the differing sets and set themes, **Magic's** colors are the biggie I was talking about. While everything is fair game for change in this game, from gameplay to product to formats to art and story- the constant that is **Magic's** fingerprint is the five colors. Conveying this to, well...everyone, is an important task. The Style Guide reaches a lot of people who may be familiar with standard fantasy, but not with **Magic's** own grand fantasy vision. This color pie info is what keeps us from seeing white fluffy kittens on black cards (sure, there's gotta be one in there somewhere, but you know what I mean) and fire-breathing hellions on blue cards. OK, I hear a couple of you out there. You'd just love to see the fluffy cat and the blue hellion. That, too, is a topic worthy of its own whole article. For now, let's just sum it up with a little metaphor courtesy of Dutch Boy: If you take red, blue, white, black, and green and mix 'em up, you will end up with 5 gallons of muddy gray-brown. Believe it or not, the Dutch Boy happens to be a big **Magic** fan, and I trust him when he tells us that the five colors look much nicer when kept pure. I may be *glossing* over an important subject here (check me out, continuing the Dutch Boy metaphor ;) but this is not the time to get into it. For now, let's accept that Wizards has determined that the Color Pie is an integral part of our game. That's why it inhabits the first few pages of every Style Guide.



The subsequent pages of the style guide start in on setting-specific information. I am going to leave that stuff for next week (or the week after, if something really tasty crops up.) Before I bid thee "til then," I must make a correction to last week's article, "[Snack Time For Vorthos](#)."



There is a reason why we have a Creative **Team**. No one person can think of everything. After completing my last article, I was particularly happy with unveiling a real monster with the first **Magic** Home Run; **Rancor**. All things seemed to fit nicely into place with regard to Maro-Sorcerer rounding the bags. I was admiring the towering blast like a little kid with the Cracker Jack box, then it happened. Maro-Sorcerer had already trotted into the dugout to receive high fives from his teammates when the umpire, (Creative Team Member, Brandon Bozzi) took a closer look at rancor's bat. Up went the ump's right arm and just like that, **Rancor** was out... of his mind! Like George Brett back in '83, Rancor went absolutely berserk. He charged the ump and had to be restrained by multiple large men. But it was to no avail- the home run was called back. In

Brett's case, he had too much pine tar on his bat. In **Rancor's** case, it was that he was actually batting for the wrong team!

While I was making a case for how well all the pieces went together, I completely overlooked the fact that, though the pieces fit *each other*, they did not fit the color of the card! Rancor= Anger, Anger = Red. **Rancor**; called out, ejected from game, fined for his actions. (On a side note, it is the belief of many people here in R&D that **Rancor** is, in fact, on 'roids.) But, until random testing catches him, he's back in the game.

Side note 1. Brandon was the first "umpire" to call **Rancor** out, but not the last. There were a couple astute Vorthoses out there who also pointed it out. One guy pointed out that the energy blasts do not really illustrate the

mechanic. He's right- but I chose to overlook this since the art, in itself, looks so cool and because the other parts seemed to play so well together. Side note 1a. Brandon Bozzi is also the very Vorthos to which I was referring when I said "Some don't read flavor text 'til after they finish the novel in case it might spoil the ending." Worry not, Vorsothian masses, for you are represented within these very walls.



Matt Cavotta has always been a fantasy goober. At various points in his gooberhood, he has used his nerdy knowledge to become a professional goober. He went from scribbling pictures of his own D&D characters to illustrating books and cards for his two favorite games; D&D and Magic. Then he channeled his inner 7th level Illusionist/3rd level Bard and landed himself a job at Wizards as a writer. He continues to cast his illusion spells each morning, lest they find out he's just another goober.



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