

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



Magic Style Guide (Part 1.5)

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Taste the Magic
Wednesday, September 14, 2005



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Last week I wrote that I might bump back part two of the Style Guide article if something else came up. Well, it did, sort of. It seems as though Style Guide Part 1 could use some clarification before we move on to Part 2. So, this week we'll be extending into Style Guide Part 1.5.

When Style does not Mean Style

First of all, it seems as though there was a little uproar that I believe was caused by the words "Style Guide" themselves. The word "Style" seems to be tricking people into thinking this document addresses, and somehow limits, the style in which artists work their wonders. Understandable. It's called the "Style Guide." But! Not true. Artists are commissioned to work on **Magic** cards because of the talent and style they have already shown in their work. Nowhere in the style guide does it say, "Paint this way" or "You must draw like Reginald T. Artnerd." Once **Magic** artists are given their assignments, they are cut loose to work in whatever art style(s) they have used in the work that earned them the job in the first place. Speaking from experience, I can tell you that *never* have I been stifled in the style I chose to illustrate a **Magic** card.

There is a real issue here, that of which art styles are a fit for **Magic**, but its relevance is only that it is specifically *not* part of the Style Guide. I am not going to discuss it at length here, as it's a 2 to 2-and-a-half part article of its own. But, I will mention it because it is one of **Magic's** more polarizing issues. The Style Guide does convey information on art tone and content, but not art style. Now that I think about it, this makes "Style Guide" sound really dumb. But, it's a juggernaut now with a lot of years of momentum, so we'll just have to remember this article and its lesson that sometimes "Style" does not mean style.

The word 'Style' seems to be tricking people...

Don't let the "Guide" get Lost

Let's take another look at the words, "Style Guide." While "style" turns out to be a word with a misleading connotation, "guide" is the perfect word- but seems to have been lost in the shuffle. This, too, is understandable. The Style Guide does use words like "all" and "every," and these do tend to make the document seem more like law than a "guide." I should have caught this one when I wrote the first article. But, I have been using style guides since I started doing **Magic** art way back in *Mercadian Masques* and you must forgive me for glossing over what has been second nature to me for years.

Anyway, "all" and "every" turn out to be words of emphasis more than words of law. In order to convey a strong message on **Magic's** brand identity, the Style Guide says "all" creatures need to be bad-ass, edgy, mage-punk, etc., "every" card needs to reflect these characteristics. The truth is, we do not really expect or want "all" or "every" of anything.

I think "all" and "every" and other hard-line language frightened some of you into thinking we are trying to turn **Magic** into a vision of hordes of raging bad-ass female warriors kicking butt and looking good for the 14 year old boys to drool over. Let's put out that fire right now. I assure you this is not the goal we have in mind. There are many missing pieces that we have not explored yet that will keep this extreme and single-minded conflagration from happening. Unfortunately, this extended Style Guide article has only explored the parts that draw the hard lines. Without getting too deep into non-Style Guide topics, I will tell you that there are a number of points of communication beyond the style guide that allow for healthy breaks from these hard-line requirements set by Style Guide text. Card concepts, art descriptions, sketch review, and final art review all provide opportunity for us to communicate individual card ideas that break from the bad-ass. They also create an opportunity for the artists to communicate ideas of their own that may not be mage-punk or directed at young males. I assure you, the process of contracting and creating **Magic** art is very organic, with each and every card being its own little **Magic** product that gets its own attention and care. They are not run through some automated wringer that tosses out the "calm" and only accepts the "bad-ass." For absolute proof of this, just crack open your binder and you'll see it staring back at you. There you'll find cards that span the entire spectrum from stately and calm to raging and bad-ass, from in-your-face mage-punk to thought provoking abstraction.

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Creativity- A Smart and Stretchy Goo...

I have also heard sentiment that the Style Guide is a hindrance to the creativity of the artists. First of all, let me tell you that it is my opinion as a **Magic** artist and a member of the Creative Team that this game would be worn out and, quite possibly, doomed if we did not use a style guide. It's probably obvious from that statement that I do *not* think a style guide is a hindrance to the creativity of artists, and I know for a fact that it is no hindrance to my own.

It is beyond the scope of this column to discuss the definition of creativity. However, it needs to be understood in some basic way in order for me to illustrate how I do not think it is not affected by the Style Guide. The way I see it, **creativity is a novel and intelligent reaction to a set of circumstances**. It is not a matter of how weird I can get, how much I can bend the rules, or what I choose to do when I can do whatever I want. That's just playing around.

Here's a scenario: The Style Guide shows me characters A, B, and C, and I have to put them all in an illustration together. Some might think this hinders my creativity, that as an artist I should be able to interpret these characters however I wish, that conforming to their ready-made look would only keep me from flexing my creativity. If I were easily daunted I might see it this way too. But, the way I look at it, the Style Guide has only shown me the circumstances in which I get to make my creativity flourish. I don't have to design any characters- they're there for me, so that leaves all my creativity to find out how best to compose, light, color, and execute my illustration. Creativity is not just showing something that's never been seen before- it's **showing what we've already seen in a way we haven't seen before**. The Style Guide does not keep artists from using their creativity- it gives them a framework upon which to stretch it. As Mark Rosewater has said so many times, restrictions don't stifle creativity, they allow it to flourish.



Ixidor, Akroma, and Kamahl were all required in this illustration, but the viewpoint, composition, color, and setting concept afforded plenty of room for creativity.

It makes me happy to hear and read such heated debate over these issues. It means people care. It's important, though, that the debate begins from a point of knowledge, so it does not spin out of control into the land of exaggerated opinions and accusations. I felt it was important to clarify these issues on **Magic** art as it applies to the Style Guide. This way, the conversation can chug along on wheels of information instead of skidding around on the skis of assumption. Part 1.5 does not have all the shiny pictures and cool graphics that 1 had, or all the wondrous concept artwork that Part 2 will have. Still, I thought this stuff was important enough to slow the machine down a bit and clear things up.

Smartypants Spoils the Pie

And now, for a little change of pace. **Magic** is a game played by a lot of smart people. These smart people visit our website and discuss things on the message boards and email the writers. I am here to tell you that you must wield your smarts with great care, for all that you say is heard here at WotC, and not just by us humans. You see, many people wrote emails or messages on the boards about the color pie image shown in Style Guide Part 1. For many it was an eye-opener, and for others it just sealed the deal on concepts they already knew about. Across the board, it seemed to be important to everybody, and that means it was scrutinized by the eyes of hordes of intelligent folks.



And these eyes were peeled when I made a jocular little comment about how in flavor it was to have only Red's pie section facing outward- (Red being the color of self-expression, individuality, and chaos.) It was just a little nod to Red, she likes the spotlight, but we can't give her too much because she has no self-control.

That's where Smartypants stepped in and caused an uproar. I just wanted to give Red a little screen time, but she was thrust center stage by all the nit-pickers out there who had to tell me that the color wheel should be rotated clockwise so all the text is mostly right-side-up. Sure, that sounds logical- but it caused

a tremendous stir. What was not seen by those outside of the color pie's secret hold is the delicate balancing act that the pie above is performing. As you can see, none of the points on the pie are straight up or down. Thus, no one color is exactly right-side-up- no preferential treatment. Red gets to be different- with her letters pointing out, Black is mostly at the top because he's very demanding, Blue is smart enough to know that this is the only way to keep everybody happy, White wishes everyone could be on the top but accepts that everybody is happy, and Green finds a way to flourish under whatever conditions she lives. It was all good in the 'hood. But not anymore. When Red caught wind that people were talking about her, she got all full of herself and demanded more and more attention. By the sheer force of her own ego and narcissism, Red turned the color pie clockwise- just as Smartypants had suggested. Once Red turned the pie, she had everything- unique lettering AND a perfect upright orientation. The others grumbled. Now Black and Green were equals, (something that did not sit well with Black at all.) Blue and White were equals too, but superior to Green and Black (something else that did not sit well with

Black.)

Now look what has happened!



It's madness! Blue and White, who don't like Red to begin with (she's way too irrational and hard to control), teamed up and started pushing down so the color pie arrows poked into Red. Black, clearly not satisfied with the division of power, took advantage of the mayhem and positioned himself upright and on top of all others. He had no problem at all stepping on "wishy-washy" White and his friend (whenever he needs her), Blue. Without a natural balance, Green started to grow out of control. What a mess! It took me hours of diplomacy, with some help from color pie guru Mark Rosewater and emergency goodwill ambassador Richard Garfield to get these 5 colors back to where they were.

So what do we all take away from this near catastrophe? It is that, though I am glad to know that people are paying close, close attention to what I write, maybe, just maybe, there are times when chiming in on such things is not so wise. Anyways, next week...lots of cool pictures. In the meantime, I am going to summon a **Goblin Chirurgeon** to help patch up Red's wounds

(White is still a little upset and would not allow for one of her more capable healers.)



*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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