

The story of the guilds of *Guildpact*, told a few italic words at a time. The Italicized World of *Guildpact*

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Writing flavor text for **Magic** cards is among the weirdest of ways to get paid for writing. It's still*writing*, of course—that grueling process of opening a vein and pouring your lifeblood into a nearby keyboard. You still get inside characters' heads and compose realistic scenes based on the setting; you still dread the deadlines and pull off marathon writing sessions the night before. But flavor text is its own crazy love-child crossbreed of world-building, poetry and collaboration—an experience unlike any other a writer might undertake. Among the other **Magic** hats I wear at Wizards of the Coast, I write flavor text. Today I take you through some of my experiences writing for *Guildpact*.

One Brief Moment in the Magic world

As a flavor text writer, you have to come to grips with some realities of your medium. Flavor text isn't novel writing. You don't have the luxury of deciding whether the heroes succeed or fail in the end. You don't decide whether the plane-shattering events end with a triumphant, cackling villain or usher in a lush new land of hope and promise. You don't have space—or the benefit of sequence—to communicate plot. Flavor text is like a freeze-frame from a movie: you get to see one, maybe two characters in action, doing something dynamic.

So you focus on what flavor text does well. At its best, flavor text creates in your mind the experience of spending one brief moment in the **Magic** world. It harmonizes with the card's art and its name, so that when you see that card in your fanned-out hand and dream up ways to smash your opponent with it, your imagination reacts the same way a warring planeswalker might. You feel the adrenaline rush of the aether rippling with your chanted syllables. You allow yourself the smug smirk of a mage ready to conjure up some otherplanar minion and give it dangerous orders. You chant over a pot of boiling blood and honey, bend the bars of fate, and then worry it's your brain you smell smoking.

Returning to Ravnica

The people who formed, Voltron-like, the colorful robo-tower of creative might known as the *Guildpact* creative text team were Elye Alexander, Garrett Baumgartner, Matt Cavotta, Jay Moldenhauer-Salazar, John Carter, Jake Theis, Rei Nakazawa and I. Three of us had previously worked on the *Ravnica* creative text team



(see [JMS's excellent article](#) on the *Ravnica* flavor text project). Returning to that plane-spanning city after (as it felt at the time) that fifteen-minute break that Master Cavotta allowed us between the end of *Ravnica* writing and the start of *Guildpact*, was actually a welcome homecoming. We loved the plane of Ravnica. Our boot-soles were already worn thin by Ravnica's rounded street-cobbles, our cloaks grime-stained by its sootstacks. We had made friends in the bazaars and back-alleys of that setting and were eager to return there, taking our crack at three new guilds.

Now, we had known about the Orzhov, the Izzet and the Gruul already— *sort of*. The model set down for the setting during *Ravnica*'s creation was—all ten guilds exist in the city at the same time. The three sets of the *Ravnica* block aren't meant to seem chronological or sequential—they all take place in the same general time period. So even though each set only focuses on three or four at a time, the other guilds not spotlighted in each set should get flavor text “screen time” too, when appropriate. In particular, mono-colored cards and non-guild-affiliated artifacts were likely spots to show off the non-featured guilds. So while writing *Ravnica* flavor text, we had all worked diligently to brush up on what the other six non- *Ravnica* guilds were about, and to contribute flavor text submissions that gave them that screen time. (You can check out this [Magic Arcana](#) for a couple examples of this from *Ravnica*.)

The Writing Schedule

The creative text process is divided into waves and rewrite rounds. There are usually two waves of cards that need names and flavor text, with a rewrite round after each. The cards from each wave are divided among the writers, with overlap so that each card is assigned to multiple writers. Once the first wave submissions are in, R&D's creative team (Matt Cavotta and company, in the case of *Guildpact*) read all the submissions, card by card, and select the best submission to go on the card. If no pieces stand out for a given card, then the card will show up again in the rewrite round. In rewrite rounds, all the writers submit ideas for those rewrite cards to make sure they get good names and flavor text. Then if there are still stragglers left at the end, there is a finish-up round where the last few cards are hammered out. Finally, after all the writers are done, the creative team makes tweaks and edits to complete the set.

From my perspective as one of the writers, here was the schedule ahead of me:

- Wave 1
- Rewrite Round 1
- Wave 2
- Rewrite Round 2
- Stragglers

However, none of us were experts in what made the Orzhov tick, or who those nutty Izzet really were, or what exactly raged in Gruul hearts. Now it was their chance to shine—now Boros and gang would have to step back into the shadows and let the three new guilds—and three truly kick-ass **Magic** color combinations—have the spotlight.

The Orzhov: Power with a Purpose

For most **Magic** sets, the cards are divided up along color lines; for example in *Champions of Kamigawa* I wrote for Green and Blue. However, in the City of Guilds, of course, guilds rule, so for *Guildpact* I was assigned Orzhov cards and Izzet cards, with a lot of non-guild-affiliated, mono-colored cards thrown in. I would definitely have opportunities to write for the Gruul as well, during rewrite rounds when the whole team takes a crack at the tougher nuts. For the first round, I already

knew that writing for the psycho-mages of the Izzet guild would be a pleasant activity, so I saved them for later—although they would turn out to be more difficult than I imagined. Nevertheless I dived into the Orzhov first.

The Orzhov combine Black's thirst for power with White's dedication to order. Their system of rules is a way to enforce a social structure, with the haves at the top and the have-nots deluded into believing that their routine of tithe and toil will pull them up the steps of the pyramid one day. The Orzhov elite love to talk about guilt and sin—not as a way to correct behavior but as a way to justify extorting from and otherwise punishing the guilt-ridden meek. And yet they are careful to maintain the perception of holiness, or else the meek might get impure (i.e. independent, disloyal) ideas. What a wonderful, twisted agenda—I knew there would be lots here to get my creative hooks into.

The first card I read out of the *Guildpact* file was the card that would become Mourning Thrull. At the time it was conceived as a Creature—Bat, a kind of vampire bat (happy **Vampire Week** by the way) that drained blood to represent the Spirit Link ability. I submitted this bizarre piece after watching a nature documentary about geckoes:

Lacking eyelids, the [leechbats] have the unsettling habit of occasionally licking their own eyeballs.

(Some geckoes really do that to keep their eyeballs moist.) As it turned out, that piece was actually accepted for the card—Matt Cavotta is a fan of the eyeball-licking, you see—but then the final art came in and the critter didn't really have eyes. On top of that, it became creature type Thrull instead of Bat, so it was more in need of flavor text about thrulls. I'm not sure who wrote the piece that's now on the card, but it's an excellent and creepy meditation on the origin of guild Orzhov's thrulls. But don't shed a tear for me—there were still plenty of Orzhov goodies waiting for me.

I fell in love with Debtors' Knell the moment I saw it, and it wasn't just because of the mechanic. I loved it because the concept behind the card, and its art description, were full of emotion—specifically lots and lots of pain. It described spirits at rest, forced to return to duty once again; reluctant servants from the afterlife, torn from their repose. It's an agonizing scene, and it points directly at how the Orzhov do business. "Get up—it's time to go to work for the Ghost Council. We don't care if you're dead."

The flavor text it inspired was my attempt to capture the emotions of one long-dead Ravnican whose spirit was called back to duty by the power of this spell. Did you ever have to get up early on a Saturday after a marathon Friday night? As a Pacific Northwest resident who's grown used to a comforting blanket of clouds, I think it's even worse when the morning sun is shining in your face—like Sauron's hellish, glaring eye. You just want to crawl back under the covers and let yourself drop away into the oblivion of sleep. But duty calls, and you have to watch your zombie feet shuffle you into that hiss-worthy daylight.



My idea for the card's name came after I had the flavor text down pat. I wondered, what is the nature of the actual spell effect that is causing this stirring of the dead? When the Ghost Council wants to call a bunch of spirits to duty, what is the flavor of the command they give? What does our viewpoint character experience to know he's being called to duty? I figured it should have to do with how the Orzhov employ spirits, which goes back to their power structure. The Orzhov utilize living-impaired minions like the Golgari do, but they aren't proper necromancers like the Golgari. They don't animate dead tissue. No—instead, they *call in favors*.

The flavor of this spell, then, is the Orzhov checking their balance sheet for any stiff who owes them something: their debtors. And I just loved the idea that the signal to call the spirits was this creepy, omnidirectional, echoing bell-toll. It's like the gloomy alarm clock going off in the ears of the dead. Bong. Bong. Bong. Get up. You owe us. Get up. You knew this time would come. Get to work—it's the Debtors' Knell.

Oh, and the inimitable Kev Walker drew a pretty nice picture to go with it. Actually, it's amazing. *It drips* with the same emotions I was trying to convey in the flavor text:



Art by Kev Walker

Hear that bonging sound? It's the sound of one flavor text writer's excited little heart. Awww.

Okay. Onward.

There were more great opportunities to explore the crime-syndicate-slash-twisted-faith of the Orzhov. I got to write for a decidedly sinister Loxodon in *Spelltithe Enforcer*—not your typical enforcer mook, but still one you don't want knocking on your shopfront door. The art (just a sketch at the time) captured my imagination—what's going on in that scene? The two behind him don't seem like the muscle compared to his elephantine bulk, so I figured they must be the accountant-types, the ones who figure out what you owe, and he handles the mystical kneecap-breaking, if you will. Note that this card isn't necessarily Orzhov in flavor; he could easily be a member of the Azorius guild, coming up in *Dissension*.

I also wrote for *Conjurer's Ban*—a study in one way the Orzhov brainwash their members and ensure power for the powerful. The flavor text on this card fills in a lot of the credibility gap on the Orzhov—if there are so many downtrodden Orzhov guildmembers serving the few powerful ones, how does the

Ghost Council maintain order? Aside from the strictures of its religion, and as part of those strictures, it implements strict thought control protocols. As you can see in Pete Venters' art, you almost literally insert your impure thoughts into receptacles near the Basilica, and some little thrull guys toss the receptacles in storage bins. And what's a "guiltwarden"? I made up the term because I thought it sounded cool, but I figure it's some sort of authority figure within the Orzhov who specializes in ensuring loyalty by manipulating guilty thoughts.

Speaking of authority figures, I actually wrote for Ghost Council of Orzhova, even though it has no flavor text in its printed form. My accepted submission was unfortunately cut to make room for that pile of rules text. I was rather proud of it, because crafting decent one-liners is hard:

"Hand over your tithe, breather."

But I didn't know it had been considered, or cut, until much later. First there were the other guilds to worry about.

The Izzet: Contents under Pressure

Like approximately 99% of everyone, I was excited about the Izzet guild: the inspired strategy of Blue combined with the guilty-pleasure face-smashery of Red; magnificent brain power combined with creative madness. Matt Cavotta urged us writers from the beginning to go wild—no, wilder than that—actually, wilder even than *that*—as we dug into this guild; we were to shed our preconceptions of how to build **Magic** card names and describe spells in action.

And when it came right down to it, I found that pretty darn hard.

For example, I both named and wrote the flavor text for Frazzle, but I can't claim much credit. First of all, there are precious few good one-word titles for counterspells—I credit R&D with creating a card concept and art description that suggested a malfunctioning alchemical gadget, which led me toward words like "frazzle." Since we already knew that the art was going to depict a goblin, it was okay to submit something a little funny—in Magic, and certainly in guild Izzet, goblins mean humor. Pete Venters had already submitted a sketch of the freaked-out goblin apprentice with his smoking arm-gadget, so the funny was already built into the card. Beyond that, the flavor text just had to follow the basic rules of goblin cards—does it have a silly goblin name in it? Check. Does it involve a goblin getting injured? Check. Does it imply that the injury is probably its own fault, due to small brain size? Check.



I think I got into the Izzet brainspace most on Wee Dragonauts. The tone of the speaker in that piece shines through more than the silly technobabble, I think—a tone of scientific arrogance that assumes that the listener sees how *obvious* it is to apply ridiculous Izzet sub-sub-subfields of mystical study to the construction of a kite. A kite piloted by faeries. Through elemental storms. With little goggles on.

I wrote the flavor text for other cards like Electrolyze, Cerebral Vortex, and Izzet Chronarch, but if I have any regrets about my work on *Guildpact*, it's that I think I never quite got into the Izzet headspace. For example, the names of Izzet cards that I find especially inspired—Mimeofacture, Gelectrode, Schismotivate—are all due to others on the team. But it all turned out okay in the end, because I found that I loved a guild that never thought I would.

The Gruul: Gruesome and Free

If there's any Nature left in Ravnica, it's in the hearts of the Gruul. This is the guild of giants who channel their rage into their shamanism, of marginalized viashino street-skulkers, of auto-amputees whose courage grows as their limb count shrinks, of piles of broken debris standing up to destroy the foundations of civilization.

I didn't come in direct contact with any Gruul cards until *Guildpact's* first rewrite round. I wasn't actually looking forward to writing for them—I had expected, frankly, to be bored by the Gruul. I expected them to be simplistic and one-dimensional: "Roar, fight, drool! We're Green/Red, raaaaghh!" So I opened the section of Gruul cards with trepidation. But the more I wrote for them, the more *enamored* I became. These are creatures of desperation, the supreme underdogs of the plane.

They face life with no pretenses and force none on others. They fight for unadorned values with death-defying passion. Despite their rough lifestyle and brutal temperaments, these are extremely *sympathetic* characters - you want them to overcome their downtrodden-ness and smash those other know-it-all guilds. You want them to cut through the tangled skein woven by the Dimir, through the maze of Azorius regulations, even through the whirling Izzet equations—and deliver a well-deserved punch to the enemy. Here are a few of the cards I worked on as my fascination with this guild grew.

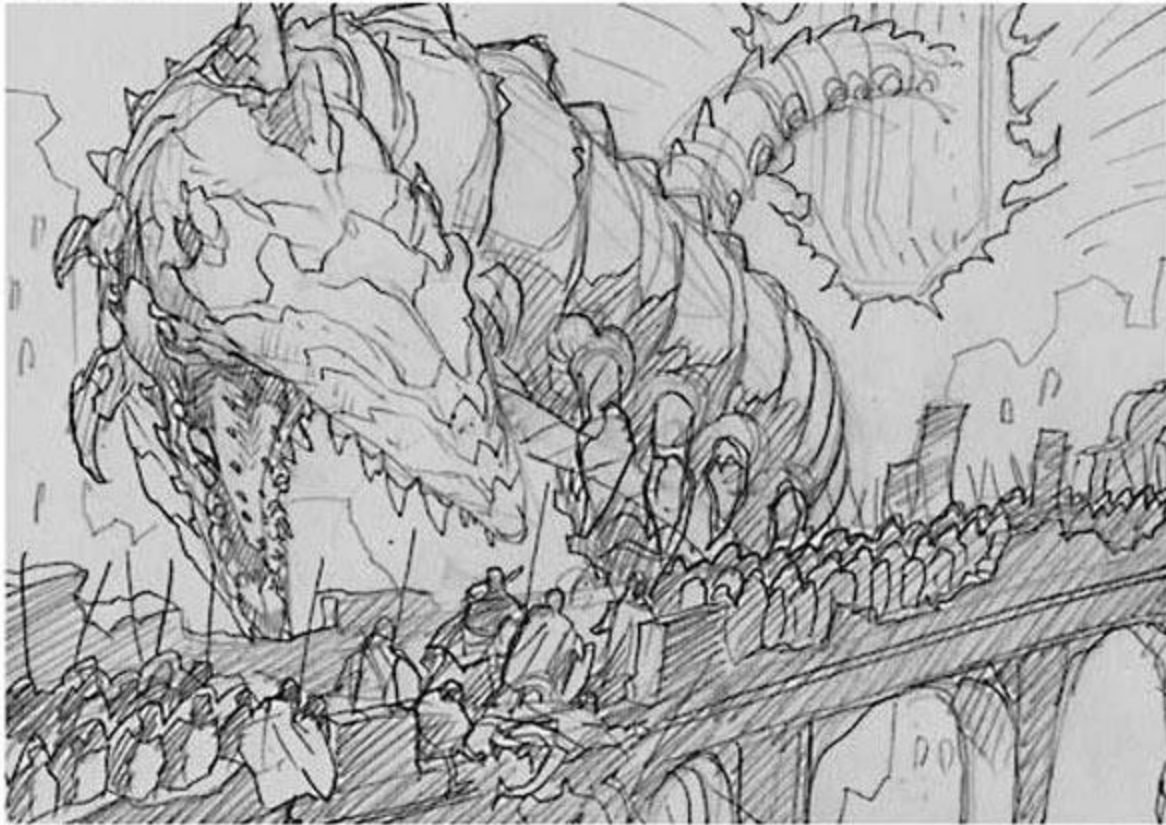
Despite their rough lifestyle and brutal temperaments, these are extremely *sympathetic* characters - you want them to overcome their downtrodden-ness and smash. When I worked on the *Ravnica: City of Guilds* flavor text team, I had a rough time coming up with submissions for its four guild signets. Each signet is a great place to put an encapsulation of that guild's philosophy and values, but that can be difficult prose to write when you spend most of your time adjusting your microscope on the details. The Gruul Signet was a fun piece to write, though—I knew the Gruul wouldn't spend *any* time coming up with an “encapsulation of their philosophy and values,” or designing a special symbol that accurately represents all their guild tenets. The way I thought of it, the written word is not unknown among the Gruul, but it's so often used as a weapon by other guilds *against* them—in the form of annoying legislation, inscrutable contracts, or filigreed scrollwork—that they would feel a strong distrust of overwrought literacy. In the end, I thought of the Gruul using mud and bodily fluids as handier, more primal, and ultimately more *expressive* ink.



The Killer Instinct flavor text was all about the art. You look at that sketch and you've got basically three ways to enrich that scene with flavor text—you can describe it from a detached third-person perspective, you can describe it from the wurm's point of view, or you can listen in on the thoughts of the poor saps on the bridge. The third was grimly humorous to me, and I thought it was especially funny to imagine that the moment right *before* the wurm breaks through the wall was a moment of triumph for some Boros or Selesnya force. It's probably not even a Gruul territory they're invading, but—pop!—suddenly there's a Gruul wurm unleashed on the scene anyway! Borborygmos's warriors

have a lesson for anyone who spends a lot of time working on battle plans: don't. Your enemy will probably just, you know, untap into a hasty wurm anyway.

92N1• Killer Instinct



Christopher Moeller

Killer Instinct sketch by Christopher Moeller

The various Gruul clans each typify one aspect of the Gruul's emotional mission. I think of the Ghor Clan as the berserkers, the around-the-bend, truly-gone-fishing psycho-warriors whose main combat discipline is the desire to really, really hurt people. These guys probably hear the world differently, a strange taste in music if you will—hence my submission on the big bloodthirst centaur, Ghor-Clan Savage. And my piece on Ghor-Clan Bloodscale, about Gruul table manners, stuck in my head long enough to link it with the one-liner on the poor, doomed Gristleback, who fights as well as he tastes. Pigs—is there anything they can't do?

The World in Italics

As you crack open your next *Guildpact* booster, I hope you'll take a moment to peer at that italicized text at the bottom of your cards for a moment—and no, I don't mean the reminder text for the haunt mechanic. Get caught up in an otherplanar struggle for dominance. Watch the trickle of sweat roll down the back of a viashino street urchin about to hurl a brick through Orzhov stained-glass. Breathe in the ozone-and-ash smell wafting from an Izzet guildmage's hair after a weird-creation ritual. Feel

the edge-ridges of coins between the fingers of an Orzhov guiltwarden as he stacks up the day's glittering tithes. And then drop an untapped shockland and start casting some gold cards.

Doug's complete *Guildpact* credits

Flavor text

Abyssal Nocturnus, Conjuror's Ban, Ghost Warden, Skyrider Trainee, Spelltithe Enforcer, Ghostway, Debtors' Knell, Frazzle, Aetherplasm, Cerebral Vortex, Electrolyze, Nivix, Aerie of the Firemind, Wee Dragonauts, Repeal, Runeboggle, Izzet Chronarch, Feral Animist, Ghor-Clan Bloodscale, Ghor-Clan Savage, Gristleback, Gruul Signet, Killer Instinct, Rumbling Slum, Wreak Havoc

Names

Agent of Masks, Battering Wurm, Beastmaster's Magemark, Debtors' Knell, Droning Bureaucrats, Dryad Sophisticate, Fencer's Magemark, Frazzle, Graven Dominator, Guardian's Magemark, Infiltrator's Magemark, Invoke the Firemind, Necromancer's Magemark, Sinstriker's Will, Skarrgan Skybreaker, Smogsteed Rider, Steamcore Weird, Withstand