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Milk and Cookies with Jim Murray

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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

So this installment of Milk and Cookies was really a secret plot of my own – to get inside the head of Jim Murray, the artist that I think is kicking the most ass in **Magic** right now. Once it came time to actually set up the meeting, I took my sinister plan one step further. I decided to take the form of a **skulking ninja rat** and infiltrate his studio, so that I could see him at work and steal his secrets. I had to contend with a **couple bodyguards** outside the cave entrance, but it was not difficult. The two seemed to be embroiled in a heated family argument. Anyway, I crept by the bickering duo and into the door.



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There, guarding the inside, was a freakish creature, a hovering oral horror! It said to me, "I will tell you all, if you but stop and listen." So I did. I thought I might not have to continue this ruse after all, if this thing would tell me everything I wanted to know. After a while, I realized that this thing just babbled on and on, never getting to the point, just saying enough to keep my butt pinned down to my seat. I pulled out a **trick of my own** to get up, and to get him to shut up.



I quietly slinked down the cave tunnel, hearing drips and groans and eerie music, and all other sorts of mildly frightening sounds. I decided to follow the music – artists often work with music in the background. This would help me, as it would make my sneaking all the more easy. I could already taste the secrets I was about to snatch from Murray's skull. Soon I, and the few others in my dark coven of artists, would know all!



The music grew louder, and I came to a large, ornate oaken door. This was it; my rat nose could smell the art supplies: the spray fix, the acrylic medium, the Doritos. My plan was to creep in and Extract whatever I could before he noticed me. But it did not go that way. I opened the door, and there he was, working on his computer. So far so good. But he must have seen my reflection in his monitor, because he used some **lightning-fast hand gestures** to conceal what he was working on. In a flash, his monitor was blank and his drawing desk was shrouded in clutter. I used my most commanding voice (not very commanding in rat form, I must say) to demand that he Rethink this course of action. He laughed, and soon I was covered in a **dark green goo**.

"Wow, this sucks," I thought. I should have **seen this coming**. Murray is no dabbling prestidigitator, he's a full-blown sorcerer. I should have thought to Muzzle him before he could speak any of his own **deadly incantations**.

He spoke. "Who are you?"

"Nobody," I replied, with the wit of a rodent.

"Tell me or I will use one of my many techniques of killing people with ice!

That's when I knew I needed a bit of luck to get out of this alive, and with my dignity intact. "Mise well resort to the ace in the hole," I thought.

"Do you like cookies?" I asked confidently. He was caught off-guard. For a moment, he was gone, lost in thought. In a slow, hushed voice he responded:

"What kind?" Now I was caught off guard! Again, to the ace in the hole:

"Chocolate chip, of course." And before he could reply, I added, "Warm and fresh, with a glass of cold milk to dip them in."

He was caught in a smiling, mouth-watering reverie. He was mine. No one can resist the power of milk and cookies! Instead of pressing my luck and rooting through his stuff or logging on to his computer, I decided to just go ahead with the interview as I had pitched it to him. Of course, we needed the milk and cookies, but we were way out in the wastelands, under some unnamed mountain, miles from the boondocks and even farther from civilization. So I asked him, "Where can we get some milk and cookies around here?"

"There's a Starbucks right around the mountain."

"Of course there is."

* * * * *

And that's where Milk and Cookies with Jim Murray actually went down. Once I took my normal (yeah, keep your jokes to yourself) human form, and Jim satisfied his craving for cookies, we had quite a nice chat. Here's how it went:

MC: Mmmm... cookies.... goood. (This was me making sure he did not change his mind.) Thanks for doing this interview, Jim. I am sure the **Magic** fans will be stoked to hear from you. Can we start out with a bit of background info?

JM: I grew up in the south of England – North Dorset to be precise – and spent many happy years living and working in London... until the UK got too intense. My lovely girlfriend Annabel and I relocated to Montreal, Canada about four years ago. Now we have three Canadian children and a golden retriever. Life is good :) I'm a full-time concept artist for a game studio here. **Magic** is a labor of love that keeps me up

into the wee small hours.

MC: Here's one I always ask: What inspired you to become an artist? And why specifically a fantasy artist?

JM: My Dad's an ex Royal Marine- and also an excellent artist so it seemed pre-determined from an early age that I'd either go into the military or start scribbling. Thankfully to all concerned I was massively interested in drawing – would have made a lousy soldier anyway. I've been pretty lucky with my peer groups, growing up, at school, college and then when I started at 2000AD; I've always been friends with other fantastic artists. I think this pushes the learning curve. Greg Staples, Trevor Hairsine, Steve Tappin, and Kev Walker were all working on Judge Dredd-related stuff when I started there. Speaking for myself at least, it was a huge boost to my own creativity hanging out with these guys. Why fantasy? I guess I have a wild imagination, which needs to be fed... and I get bored pretty quick if the subject doesn't interest me – I could never be one of those guys on the sea front doing portraits of tourists for example, that'd kill me. Nope – gotta be imagination-based art or nothing. I get inspired by weird characters doing strange things, and I guess while most of my subliminal reference comes from reality it's that bizarre twist that fantasy art allows which really hooks me.

MC: How long have you been working as an artist?

JM: 13 years – officially. I got my first 2000AD commission when I was 21. I was doing various commissions before then but not being too professional about it.

MC: Who are your artistic influences and favorites?

JM: Well, I'm from a comics background, so my original influences were all storytelling geniuses – Will Eisner, Bernie Wrightson, Frank Quitely, to name but three. Expanding from that I was of course hugely influenced by Frazetta – as was anyone of our generation in our line of work, surely – and more contemporarily by Bisley, Sienkiewicz, Rob Bliss, Phil Hale, again to mention only a few. I love Greg Staples' stuff, and Kev Walker's cards



are always really cool. In fact there's generally something to love about most of the cards I see in the game - which can be overwhelming at times.

MC: What media do you use?

JM: Given the choice I'm always going to try to use traditional media; for me that's about 90% acrylics, and nearly all my **Magic** card artwork is done this way. For my concept art job I'm using Photoshop to paint most images due to time constraints. However, everything I do always starts from a reasonably solid pencil sketch, which for me is hopefully a constant that unifies the style across the different media. Obviously you can get some rapid and spectacular results digitally... but... call me a Luddite if you will, I hope I never pass up the chance to work with actual paint, it's the hardest thing to do well and every painting is a daunting challenge; hardly ever turns out as you'd hope, but when it does the satisfaction is a whole lot more than I get with Photoshop.



MC: Where else might we see your artistic handiwork?

JM: Typically the stuff I do for games is not for distribution. It gets used for production, to sell a concept to a client, occasionally surfacing at expos like E3 but usually ending up festering in some backwater server in the company basement. I have two Batman graphic novels out, *Batman/Judge Dredd: Die Laughing* and *Batman/Demon*, both pretty old now though. Anyone interested can check out a selection of pages on my site www.jimmurrayart.com. I'm currently trying to produce a graphic novel with my writer friend Robbie Morrison that will hopefully come out late '07.

MC: Be sure to let us know when that hits the shelves. I am sure there are goobers everywhere who would love to see it. (One is sitting right here.) Speaking of goobers, do you know how to play **Magic** or any other fantasy-genre games?

JM: Unfortunately I haven't fully learnt **Magic** yet; I simply don't get enough time to sit down and learn the game, although every tournament or pre-release I go to I pick up more and more from players kind enough to explain a few things to me. I played a lot of **D&D** and fantasy role-playing games in my youth, but I was equally fascinated in creating the world we played in. I guess I'm privileged to be doing that now to a small extent with **Magic**.



MC: It does not surprise me to hear that you were a **D&D**er. In fact, almost all the **Magic** artists I know grew up as **D&D** players. Historically, **D&D** had a pretty bad rap. For me, I know it played a huuuuge role in the building and stretching of my imagination, not to mention my vocabulary and my love of reading. Do you feel that non-visual forms of expression like this helped you develop as an artist?

JM: That's a pretty interesting point, I totally agree! When you have to conjure up characters, environments or actions

based on a thin description, then your mind is usually running riot filling in all the gaps - as opposed to being presented with a final image, which requires little active thought. I guess this is great exercise for the imagination. As well as **D&D** I remember we played a huge amount of other RPGs in college. I don't play at all these days, but I do get an incredible amount of inspiration from reading for the same reason. I think once you have a reasonably comprehensive visual language you can create pretty wild ideas with just text-based stimuli. **D&D** especially has probably played a large role in enhancing original thought in artists and steering us away from the obvious in a lot of cases.



MC: What was your very first **Magic** illustration?

JM: I think it was **Nim Abomination** from the *Mirrodin* set. But, in fact, the very first card I did was never used. It's on my site, though - an artifact creature that looks like a kind of giant green metal beetle with a couple of tiny characters trying to fight it off.

MC: Let's talk about my favorite Murray creations, **Macabre Waltz** and **Wakestone Gargoyle**.



JM: I was trying for something a little weird and unexpected, freakish anatomy, a kind of loving embrace where it looks like the couple might just devour each other immediately after the shot. I actually like the piece, which is rare, but I can see many flaws now that I would rectify if I ever re-visited it.

MC: I think this is one of **Magic's** most powerful images. It pushes the envelope of what is visually digestible to the viewer. This art caused meetings to happen at Wizards, just to decide if this was something we could show or not. In the end, a couple minute alterations were called for in the female's clothing. But the point is, this much sensuality, this much horror, this much blood, were all championed by the folks at Wizards because the painting is so freaking good. If this subject matter came out even the slightest bit un-awesome, it would get killed in a second.

Look at the texture of the walls compared to the slick, shiny wetness of the blood. Look at the bodies, simultaneously twisted *and* anatomically sound. A bloody masterpiece, this one.



JM: My main concern was to just sell the concept. I think it kind of works, but I'm not real happy with the way the piece turned out.

MC: OK, I have to pick your brain about what's not to like about the gargoyle.

JM: Well I should really keep quiet and quit while I'm ahead... But, in the spirit of sharing, I think I missed the chance to create a really interesting creature here. They could look a little more bizarre and bugged-out and still keep a gargoyle feel. Also, it's bright daylight – should have gone a bit more gothic with the lighting given the subject matter. Lastly there's a bunch of small things about the execution that could be better- like perhaps I should have actually looked at some reference of old stone statues or something before I dove in and painted the thing. I guess I've learnt something for the next time – if I ever have to paint some flying stone carvings again! I think I'll shut up just about it now....

MC: I have a few things to say to that. First of all, each piece should not be compared to what it could have been. Let's look at what it *is*. For me, the gargoyles themselves are well painted, well-designed, and really *feel* like stone. I also enjoy the daytime scene. The pastel colors in the background are unexpected and refreshing. A bold and artsy touch, if you ask me. But the real deal-sealer for me is that this piece tells a whole story in a single moment in time. The gargoyles were bound to that building until this one let out a great cry for freedom. It's a great snapshot, and it inspired me to write the flavor text for the card:

Its pulsating cry shatters bonds of iron, granite, and servitude

So tell us which **Magic** pieces you feel did work out.

JM: I'm not often 100% satisfied with anything that I produce. I guess maybe a couple of the more successful ones personally have been **Sundering Titan** and **Wildsize**.

MC: Let me interrupt here for a moment. I want to mention how great it is to hear you say that you're not satisfied with your own work. Not because I want you to suffer (though I had planned to rob you of your secrets). No, I am glad to hear it because it illustrates a theory I have about great artists. The great ones are always their own worst critic, never satisfied for more than the time it takes the paint to dry. This self-criticism leads to a hunger for improvement, and that hunger leads to greater art. If you ever hear an artist say, "I *am* great," chalk him up in the has-been category. You see folks, I have already seen what Jim has coming up in the next few sets. I can tell you first-hand that the stuff gets better. This is why. Of course, he'll tell us that he hates those too. But that's great. We can love them, while Jim hates them all the way to his next masterpiece.

Not to suggest, Jim, that you hate all your own work. I was just deploying some well-meaning hyperbole. Anyway, **Sundering Titan**:



JM: The Titan was one of the first I did for **Magic**, I think it's got a reasonable mix of weirdness and elegance to it which makes it fairly unique. I quite like the color palette too... and coincidentally it seems to be one of the more popular cards I've done judging by the number of people who want that card signed – not sure that has anything to do with the artwork, though.



Probably just a personal thing, but I had a lot of fun with this piece and, aside from some dodgy color blending, there's not much I'd change about it. For me it has the right amount of 'in yer face' aggression, attitude and humor. Oddly, though, I don't think it fully works to sell the concept, like you have to kind of do a double-take to see that the Goblin in the foreground is huge.... Still, I like it. :) There are a few cards I've done recently, yet to be published, which I'm a lot happier with; going into my fourth year on **Magic** and I'm finally starting to find a groove....

MC: That's what I was talking about. People, you are in for some treats. One in particular is coming up in *Planar Chaos*. I was so smitten with it that I have already demanded it as my preview card. More Jim Murray here at Taste The Magic is a good thing.

And hey, folks, don't just email me to thank me for bringing you this interview and these peeks at Jim's awesome work. Take a spin over to www.jimmurrayart.com and send him a thank you also – for making so many ass-kicking illustrations for all of us to enjoy.

JM: Thanks for the plug.

MC: No, thank you for the wonderful chat – and for not killing me with ice.

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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