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Tea and Biscuits with Pete Venters

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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

I don't suppose it would surprise anyone when I say that **Magic's** art director has often been a **Magic** artist as well. Jesper Myrfors, Sandra Everingham, Dana Knutson, Matt Wilson, Ron Spears, Jeremy Jarvis—all **Magic** artists, all **Magic** art directors. And so here I am, a **Magic** artist, holding down the fort in the Creative department as a writer. Odd, eh? Well, not so odd. In fact, I am not even the first one to do it.

About 10 years ago, long-time **Magic** art baron Pete Venters was a part of **Magic's** non-art-related Creative as well. I came to know about Pete and his deep vault of arcane **Magic** lore while working on Coldsnap. Pete was a tremendously valuable source of first-hand information on that period in **Magic's** history. It also became clear that he had more info than we knew what to do with—and that brings us here...

...To our first installment of Tea and Biscuits. (I was going to call it Coffee and Donuts, but changed it at the urging of Venters, a Brit.) These will be interviews that go down the same way as our Milk and Cookies ones do, but we won't be talking about art. In this case, we'll be talking about whatever spills forth from the Venters cerebral font regarding his work on the **Magic** Creative team (then called the Continuity Department.)



Pete and I agreed to meet on Ravnica. As you all know, we're all planeswalkers, so we can meet pretty much anywhere. We did not meet at a 10th District pub or a Tin Street bakery. No, we met deep in the lower vaults of **Prahv**. Why? Because that's where the speediest, most reliable note-takers and stenographers are. If I know anything about Pete, it's that he can really unload the verbiage. So there we met, and here's what the horde of vedalken scribblers recorded:

MC: Let's start at the beginning. How did you get your paint-spattered foot in the door of the Continuity Department?

PV: The answer is a convoluted one. On one of my early trips to Seattle, I found myself talking to John Tynes, who was at that time tasked with unifying the **Magic** storylines. The first step in the plan was to produce an "Encyclopedia Dominia," a humongous coffee table book filled with stories and facts of the multiverse. My chief involvement was to produce a fully painted comic book introduction, but I soon found myself brainstorming with John about the history and cultures of the **Magic** universe, including the story of Galina III and her escape from Sarpadia to rule the merfolk city of Etlan Shiis.



MC: Quick interjection—is Galina III related somehow to the Empress Galina from *Invasion*?

PV: Yeah, they're one and the same. She fled from homarid-infested Sarpadia with her court, traveling through time with a magical portal. She landed in the future, in Etlan Shiis. There, she and her militant fish-folk took over the peaceful place.

MC: It's not surprising—you can see in a fish's eyes that there's just no compassion there. What else was in the Encyclopedia's comic?

PV: We tackled stuff on Benalia, Hurloon, Llanowar, Phyrexia, Corondor, the **Adarkar Wastes** and the first look at a bunch of planeswalkers, including Taysir, Freyalise and some others who were never heard of again. (Remember Sandruu?) The comic portion was actually told by an elderly Taysir to a young Daria and was set during the time when Taysir was trapped in Ulgrotha.

Unfortunately, the book was nixed, and a lot of work went to waste. Well, not the back story stuff, but all those pages will never be printed.

MC: Can we see some of your artwork anyway?

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MC: So this Encyclopedia project somehow nudged the door open for you?

PV: It got me excited to be involved with shaping Dominia. On my next trip to Seattle, I did a Continuity edit for the *Homelands* backstory crafted by Scott Hungerford and Kyle Namvar. I think I blundered into this opportunity because I learned that the set had a very rich back story, so I was intrigued to read it before starting on the artwork. The document was indeed far more realized than any **Magic** story that had come before it, but it was also running into the problem that it had so many plot threads that it was contradicting itself. So I offered to run a continuity edit on it. I think I tackled the edit in its entirety on the flight from Seattle to a **Magic** event in New York.

MC: And so that little *Homelands* opportunity proved your worth and you were off to the races?

PV: Probably. I sometimes think I kind of sidled into the position. I eventually moved to Seattle to work full-time for Wizards, where I joined Scott Hungerford in the **Magic** Continuity department. I also had a second job at Wizards: Artist Liaison. However, within 8 months the Artist Liaison job had gone to someone with more of a legal background as the job constantly required me to talk to the lawyers anyway. Can't say I was sorry to see that part of my job gone.

[grumbling amongst the Azorius.]

PV: Oh, don't even. I've seen your legal fees. Go weep into your angel-down pillows!

MC: You tell 'em, Pete! So, in a nutshell, what did the Artist Liaison do anyway? Keep it brief, or it might get the readers grumbling too.

PV: It seems kind of muddled now. I think they wanted me to be a contact point for the artists for questions that the art director wouldn't have time to tackle. But, as I mentioned, the questions became increasingly about legal matters like licensing so I wasn't well equipped for that job.

MC: I guess that's why Wizards has its own whole legal department now.

What was your first full-on dive into **Magic** creative?

PV: The first card set I got to work on from the ground up was *Alliances*. I clearly remember that sunny day in July of '95 when myself and Scott took lunch outside with the lunch table covered in the maps of Terisiare that had seen print so far. This was when I proposed that the mining from the Brothers War and the glaciers from the Ice Age would have wreaked such destruction on Terisiare that most of the land was swallowed by the melt water. This also allowed us to reduce the size of Terisiare as the original designers had made this flattened spud-shaped continent enormous. Breaking up the rather amorphous continent was done to create a more interesting landmass, sure, but it was also an opportunity to create vast submerged treasure troves lost since the Brothers War. None of this was really a vital part of the *Alliances* set, so why was this stuff important? In short, we were building the setting with an eye to future adventures in the **Magic** RPG!

MC: Magic RPG!???

PV: When I first joined Wizards, the **Magic** RPG was under development. It was clear to Scott and I that the work we did for each set needed to stand up to the far more rigorous needs of an RPG environment. The Terisiare of old was an expansive continent with huge tracts of featureless land. Our breaking down the continent into more manageable portions was the first step. The underwater wealth, and a more visually appealing (and realistic) coastline were all added benefits of the process.



However, as the RPG developed, it became clear that the designers wanted to start the game in the Domains, and more specifically Aeronia, which contained iconic locations such as Benalia, Llanowar, and Hurloon, as well as Estark, Avenant, and the Red Iron Mountains, with Keld and Parma to the north. I gave myself the epic task of collating all of the relevant geographical information from the novels and articles, and making a map of Aeronia. Looking back on it, my obsessive tendencies about these things clearly borders on crazy! Thankfully, only a very small portion of the printed info so far was contradictory.

MC: Was a large part of your job ironing out all the inconsistencies in early **Magic** storylines? I assume so, since the name of the department back then was "Continuity." Why were there contradictions?

PV: Because a number of novels were off to the printers before the Continuity Department existed. Sure, a book editor can catch a lot of things, but their time just isn't well served comparing geographical info from various stories to see how they sync. And we're not talking about two sources saying Estark & Llanowar are at different distances, but how both those locations relate to any given third location. A lot of the triangulation was off... I think that's the easiest way to explain it. Getting the map of Aeronia done meant that we had a visual aid for everyone, which helped immensely. Tom Wänerstrand created a version that saw print in one of the **Magic** calendars.

The next problem we faced in preparing Dominaria for the RPG was the sheer scale of the planet. In the book department's guidelines for **Magic** they stated that Dominaria was 30 times the size of Earth. This was conceived so that the world was big enough to hold almost anything without fear of contradiction. Of course, that's wishful thinking as even a planet that large has to have the same number of hours in a day from story to story, and the sun needs to pick either east or west to rise in (that contradiction did happen in the short time before we tried to ratify things).

Anyway, the RPG peeps were just as horrified as myself that the planet could be that big, but the book department had been the guardians of the storyline before **Magic** Continuity came along and they were resistant to change. I set up a meeting with a few members of the Book Department and the RPG team. When they entered the meeting room, I'd prepared for them a 6 by 5 grid on the large wall-mounted whiteboard, and in one of the centerpieces of the grid, I'd drawn a map of Earth. This visual aid made short work of pointing out why no one needed a Jupiter-sized Dominaria, and that's why you now have Dominaria being a "mere" 2.5 times the surface area of Earth. This was especially relieving for the RPG crowd, as they didn't want a character to have to travel for 3 years just to escape a temperate climate in search of tropical or arctic adventures!

[The Azorius nod in appreciation for Venters's ability to talk ad infinitum.]

So, with the size of the world established, I set to work on the map of Aeronia. The RPG people wanted it to cover a lot of the potential climates. A little bit of sub-arctic all the way to sub-tropical or tropical. So, Aeronia had to cover a lot of ground north to south, but, and here's the kicker, the continent couldn't be too large. Essentially, what I came up with was a long thin strip of land that curves and bulges just enough times to hide the fact that it's actually trying to skimp on the east-west mileage. I'm still really pleased with Aeronia. It managed to be everything the RPG people needed and was aesthetically very pleasing.



With that established, I started working on the globe of Dominaria. I bought a second-hand globe of Earth, stripped the vinyl from it, and spray-painted it white. Then I started applying the various landmasses to it in ink. This was all done to an exact scale. The globe was done as solid black on white because it would allow us to photograph it and easily isolate the landmasses in photoshop so that we could create more detailed maps. The globe also featured the ridges of the continental plates and the direction in which they travel because this was important to accurate positioning of mountains. See note above re: obsessive & crazy!

MC: How does all that hard work end up benefiting the **Magic** player? Where will they feel it?

PV: It's all about having a good foundation before you start building. The general chaos of the setting was certainly fresh and cool when Alpha and *Legends* were seeing print, but people wanted to know more than what they could piece together from flavor text.

MC: That's all really involved stuff. Do you have any quick-hitters that might interest **Magic** goobers?

PV: The continental plate under destroyed Argoth is completely shattered.

MC: Cool. Keep going...

PV: Because of this, there's a north-south deep-sea trench that runs almost all the way from Argoth to Sarpadia. This is why the Homarids (the Kjeldorans called them Viscerids) were able to migrate to Terisiare; they prefer their water cold.

MC: So homarids are originally from...?

PV: Probably from the waters surrounding the southernmost continent. When the world started to enter the Ice Age, they began to encroach on the once-warmer waters around Sarpadia.

MC: And traversed the deep sea trench to...

PV: The deep-sea trench lies a little way north of Sarpadia. Once they'd found that, they just kept expanding their realm until they found Argoth. If, after the Ice Age ended, the Homarids caught in warmer waters learned to adapt, that would make for a nasty north-south divide in the Dominarian waters that's probably a real challenge for merfolk to pass through safely.

MC: So this is why we find crab-folk in both *Fallen Empires* and *Ice Age* block...

PV: Here's another piece of trivia—during the wars depicted in *Fallen Empires*, it was the thrulls that won control of Sarpadia. No one else could match their ability to react and evolve. Supposedly the orcs gave them the hardest fight but when the thrulls started creating Cave-Stormers (a creature composed of a central mouth ringed with razor sharp teeth surrounded by eight legs that could charge through orc caves, turning anything it met into a meaty red vapor without even decelerating) the end was in sight for the orcs. I'd still like to see that sucker on a card.

MC: When did this happen? What was the historical context with regard to **Magic** sets?

PV: The thrulls probably took less than fifty years to dominate Sarpadia. There's no historical context as Sarpadia is so isolated. The only reason that the thrulls didn't go on to rule the world is that they lacked imagination and never realized that there was anything else beyond the horizon-line of water surrounding Sarpadia. We used to say, that if one day a ship came to Sarpadia it might be the beginning of the end for Dominaria.

Still, the Phyrexians beat them to it. However, you'll note that we never did learn what happened when the Phyrexians tried to invade Sarpadia.

MC: Did any of this thrull history or thrull vs. Phyrexian stuff appear on cards or in books?

PV: There was one tale that saw print in *The Duelist* where Phyrexians were questioning someone (possibly Endrek Sahr?) about the thrulls. I can't find the details now, but it may have hinted that the thrulls' creation involved some stolen Phyrexian devices. The Phyrexians were not only miffed at the theft of their secrets, but what they'd been used for. Still, rumor persists that the Phyrexians eventually had to admit that the thrulls showed promise and imported some of them into Phyrexia for study.

Even with the Phyrexians' laborious planning for the *Invasion*, they may have met far greater resistance than they imagined in Sarpadia. Even now there may be Thrulls trying to understand where the Phyrexians came from. Who knows? Maybe future products will contradict all of this; after all, if it hasn't seen print, it's not necessarily canon. But this is what I had planned. I'd love to see a future **Magic** set tackle these questions.

(Hey all you story goobs—if you know anything about the *Duelist* story Pete mentioned, please post it on the message boards.)

MC: Here's a big question... Where can the turbo Vorthoses out there go to dig deeper into this stuff? Recent **Magic** sets pack all of their creative mojo into the cards, novels, and this website. Back in the day, this stuff flew all over the place. Can you point to some specific places where the peeps can find out more about Aeronia, thrulls, homarids, Phyrexians, etc.?

PV: Phyrexia.com has done a lot to collect these stories. There are Wikipedia entries on **Magic** history, as well as forums on other sites.

MC: I'd be a boob not to mention our own [storyline forums](http://storylineforums) as well. There are goobs who know an insane amount of arcane **Magic** history who regularly haunt our electronic netherspace. (By the way, Pete has been known to pop his head in the forums as well. You never know when the ol' Brit will appear to treat you to some historical secrets.)

I know this was not an artist interview, but do you have a website you want to plug? Someplace for the folks to see what you're doing for **Magic** these days?

PV: Peteventers.com. It's still under construction, unfortunately, and it's a ways from being ready because actual art commissions have to take priority. Now, before I head home, I need to see a guildmage about a nice potion to help me paint faster...

* * * *

And with that, I got the hint, Pete was up against a deadline working on *Morningtide* art. I bade him farewell with a handshake, then quickly gave him directions to **Sunhome**, where he could find himself a **Boros Guildmage** to throw a little *haste* on him before he gets back to painting.



If you're lucky enough to catch Pete in the Art and Artists or Storyline forums, do not hesitate to say "Thanks, man" for 10+ years of great work on the look and underbelly of **Magic**. Same goes for those of you who are lucky enough to catch him signing cards at a Prerelease or summer con. Ask questions—plumb the seemingly endless depths of ancient lore.

*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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