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How Art Thou?

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Taste the Magic
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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Every time I have been to a **Magic** tournament or to a gaming convention, I hear the same few questions. Sure, hearing "Which of your cards is your favorite?" for the gazillionth time can be a bit tiresome, but it's that person's first time asking, so I give 'em the answer with a smile each time, "I don't really have a favorite," I say "It's like asking parents which child is their favorite." Then, if they really seem to want a specific reply, I'll give them my flavor of the month. If you're curious right now, I'd have to say my favorite is [redacted]. Oh yeah, I can't talk about *Lorwyn* cards yet. You'll have to wait 'til September to ask me again (I'll be at the *Lorwyn* pre-release in Louisville, Kentucky.) But you never know, by that time my favorite might be the sweet little *Morningtide* number I just finished off.

Anyway, where was I? Oh yeah, the questions I always seem to hear. Other than the old, "How do you pack on such mass in your biceps and triceps?", the questions I hear most are all about how I (or any other **Magic** artist) come up with the ideas for the art on the cards. Again, I do my best to deliver an answer as if it were the first time I had heard the question. If everyone is asking, then I suppose it must be very interesting to folks. Which is why I have decided to run through the answers here today.



(If you're interested in the biceps question, all I can say is breathe in through the nose, and curl your opening hand whenever you play. Get yourself a **Library of Leng**. Mulligans are for wimps. 7+ cards or go home, baby!)

"So how do artists come up with the ideas for all those little illustrations?" This question is often followed by one of the following: "Do they tell you what the cards do?", or "Do you just do what you want and they make a card out of it?", or "Do they tell you what to draw?" I am going to run through the process of commissioning an artist for a **Magic** card and assigning him a card illustration. Once we've completed our little mock job, I believe all these questions will be answered. (As well as some other common questions that pop up from time to time.)

We're going to follow our fictitious friend, Dude Painter, from the point where Jeremy Jarvis, **Magic's** art director, has decided to assign him his first **Magic** illustration job. (This is not about how he contacted Jeremy or what he did to impress him—that's meat for another barbecue.)

Dude gets an email or phone call from Jarvis telling him he'll be involved in the next card set, codename Raisins. He'll be illustrating 1 card. At this point, everything Dude has ever painted is put behind him, as he must learn a bit about **Magic** art before diving into the work. Many folks ask whether Wizards buys art that artists have already painted with the intention of turning it into card art. That has happened in the past, but doesn't happen anymore. All **Magic** art is now created with the specific purpose of being **Magic** art. This is important, because the next thing Dude needs to do is learn why nothing he has already done will fit the bill.

Soon after Dude signs his contract as an Independent Contractor—not an employee, Dude receives a Style Guide. For some info on style guides, check out these ancient TTM articles: [Style Guide Part 1](#), [Style Guide part 1.5](#), and [Style Guide Part 2](#). The style guide, in a nutshell, explains to artists what **Magic** is about, how the art works in the game, and what the specifics are of, in this case, the world of Raisins. Dude reads the style guide thoroughly.

Soon he will get an email from Jarvis that looks something like this:

Art Commissioned to Dude Painter -- lorddude@dudepainter.com

ART ID: 5555555 TITLE: [Raging Rigger]*
SIZE: 2 1/16" (52mm) wide x 1 1/2" (38mm) tall PRICE: \$X SKETCH DUE:
6/26/2013 12:00:00 AM ART DUE: 7/24/2013 12:00:00 AM

ART DESCRIPTION:
Color: Red creature

Location: Unimportant; perhaps craggy wasteland

Action: Show a female goblin rigger leaping off of the base of a rusty bronze monument to attack foes below. (See style guide for reference on riggers and monuments.)

Final Wrap-up

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Focus: The goblin attacker

Mood: Move over Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka...

Dude consults his style guide for details on riggers and monuments. He is impressed at the depth of information about riggers, their races, clothing, equipment, social hierarchy, etc. He zeroes in on the parts that are important to his illustration. He does the same thing with monuments, then rereads the section on Red cards and what they are supposed to be like.

Now he grabs his sketchbook and starts going to town. He does bunches of sketches, then fleshes out the one he likes most and emails it to Jarvis. He's a little apprehensive about sending in his favorite one. He's added in a crazy double-bladed weapon of his own design. He does not see one like it in the style guide. To be safe, he also sends in another sketch that stays in line with the rigger equipment shown in the style guide.

Jarvis emails back later that day telling him that the one with the double-blade is great, and that he loves the organic shape of the blades. But, the monument in the background is competing for attention with the weapon. He says that Dude can rework it however he wants to focus on the weapon rather than the monument. "What's most important," Jarvis writes, "is not to include the monument, but to show a world in which the monument could exist."

This reminds me a lot of working on *Ravnica*. Artists did not absolutely *have* to put buildings in their art, but they did have to show a world that did not contradict a city setting.



Dude is ecstatic. He gets to run with his own idea. Well, partially his own. Never in a million years would he have randomly decided to depict this goblin in a strange world of forced labor and giant monuments to unknown deities and overlords. But, the composition, weapon design, and dynamic Pro Wrestling-style pose were all his own. In having some ownership over the subject in his work, Dude pained with more excitement and more pride than he would have if the assignment were super-rigid. (This, incidentally, is one reason why **Magic** has drifted away from telling tales storyboard style, like in *Tempest* Block. Artists grew weary of depicting this exact guy on the deck of this particular ship, yelling at that specific guy...again.) But, on the flip side, it is important for artists to adhere to the spirit of their art descriptions, because they are written as a group to add up to the greater vision of the world.

Dude paints his painting and it turns out well. Jarvis is happy, and Brady Dommermuth (the dude who writes most art descriptions) is down with it too. The goblin still has the costuming and crazed look of Raisins block goblins, and the sooty sky is in line with the landscapes in the style guide. The monument that was taken out will not be sorely missed—plenty of monuments will be shown in other cards, not to mention the thirty-two Artifact—Monument cards in the set.

After a little paper shuffling, Dude receives his check in the mail. Then he gets another email from Jarvis. "Want to do a couple cards in the next set? Due dates are..." The process repeats.

Let's just say that Dude ends up painting **Magic** cards for years. After a while, he'll have a pretty good idea of what **Magic** is all about. He may, if inspiration strikes, ask Jarvis if it's OK to explore some of his own ideas for a card, rather than work with the art description he got. Jarvis trusts that he, an experienced **Magic** guy, knows the importance of the style guide and will fashion his own ideas within its parameters. Dude gets the green light. An extra-stoked Dude turns out some awesome work with a fresh new perspective. Everybody wins.

"So how do artists come up with the ideas for all those little illustrations?"

As we saw with Dude's experience, they sort of don't, at least not without some help from the Creative Team. But, just about every **Magic** card illustration has bits and pieces that are the creative contribution of the artist. Artists are like weeds; they will find ways to creep and sprout and show their stuff wherever they see an opening. Magic card art descriptions are specific enough to tell artists what a card's conceptual needs are, but they do not keep the artists from adding more "oomph" to the concept or from putting their own twist on the delivery.

This leads into the question "**Do they tell you what to draw?**" The answer is yes, and no. Dude received a pretty detailed description of a scene with a goblin rigger. In the end, Dude was allowed to distill the art description down to just the essential parts and then let his own creativity take over from there. You should also note that the art description does not include any demands on color, viewpoint, composition, body positioning, background requirements, facial expression, or style suggestions. All of that stuff is wide open whether an artist receives an art description like Dude's (a pretty standard a.d.) or a one liner ("Show a giant woodland beast of your own design.") or a verbose doozy like this one, the art description for **Ancestral Vision**.

Color: Blue

Location: see below

Action: This a "Time Delay" Spell. Show the pyramids based on the Aztec style, from Ancestral Recall in a solarized blue green background. (That represents one point in time). But these pyramids are trapped between two dimensions. Everything in the solarized world is before the apocalypse and are not destroyed but the tops of all the pyramids that break through the solarized color appear in "local color" and everything in the "local

color' dimension is in ruins and post apocalyptic. Visible somewhere in the frame, even if in the background, are three faint ghosts (not Aztec ghosts or anything, just three humanoid spirits).

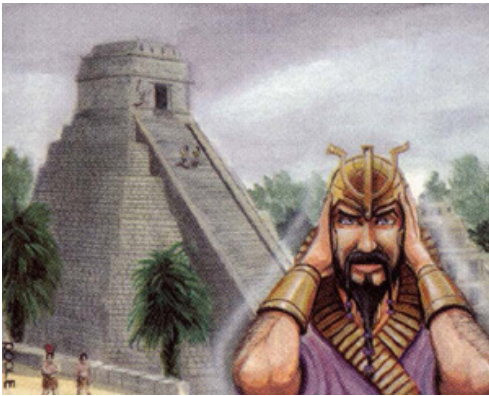
Focus: the crumbling pyramid

Mood: ancient, quiet

Notes: LINK to 92305.

>>"Time Delay" spells are creatures or things that move from 1 time dimension (represented by a green/blue monotone color) and they move into our dimension represented by "local color". Think of a water fall. Everything behind the waterfall is the solarized dimension and everything in front of the waterfall is in local color. See jpegs for examples. Think of the delay thing as a fog/mist line.

The interesting thing to note about **Ancestral Vision** is that it was assigned to Mark Poole, the artist who painted **Ancestral Recall**, the card it was meant to reflect. That being the case, even a longwinded art description like this one really just asked the artist to add the "Time Delay"(read: Suspend) visual cue to your idea from years ago.



I think Brady and Jeremy do a great job in letting artists run wild with the parts of their art that do not contradict the style guide of the current card set. Art descriptions are often written as examples of how an artist *might* illustrate a card, but ultimately leaves it up to them to solve the problem. Check out [this Magic Arcana](#) from May 13, 2003 for an example of Wizards letting the artist tickle his own fancy.

As an artist myself, it's easy for me to say that artists deserve a good share of the credit for the cool ideas that are expressed in **Magic** illustrations. But, as a member of the Creative Team (who has also written art descriptions), I have to say that a great deal of cool ideas are hatched before art is even assigned.

"Do they tell you what the cards do?"

Not usually. The art descriptions I've shown so far are pretty much what the artists get. There may be cases where an art description says what the "spell" does, but not really what the card's stats are. Artists cannot all be expected to understand the intricacies of **Magic** gameplay, so that information would most often be meaningless. Here's an example of an art description (from **Even the Odds**) that tells the artist what the spell does in layman's terms:

Color: White Spell

Location: not important

Action: This spell "calls for reinforcements" when you're up against the ropes, in the form of three soldiers. How to represent this is up to you. One idea is to show a fallen soldier whose sword, helm, and shield have fallen onto the ground around him. The armaments reflect the fallen soldier's form, and those reflections have magically come to life and are emerging from the armaments, stepping foot into the real world.



Focus: The arriving reinforcements

Mood: the tide has turned

There are some rare occasions when artists are given card abilities to help them find the best possible solution to illustrating a complicated card. I cannot say how often it happens to other artists, but I can say that it does happen

to me. Jarvis knows, as did the art directors before him, that I was a **Magic** player before I became a **Magic** artist. If a particular card (**Extract**) was giving them fits with its odd (**Twiddle**), abstract abilities (**Mise**), they'd just flip me the card text and cut me loose. (It is strange and interesting that the first three examples that came to mind are all 1 mana Blue spells.) I am sure that I am not the only artist with whom art directors have had this sort of relationship. I know a whole bunch who play **Magic**, and would not be surprised if they got the same deal.

The only question remaining is "**Do you just do what you want and they make a card out of it?**" I think it's pretty clear that the answer to this one is no. But, **Magic** has very few absolutes. There have been cases where pre-existing art has been bought and turned into card art. **Maro** is the only example I can think of, but I doubt it's the only one. Also, a select bunch of artists were given the *Mirrodin* style guide then asked to illustrate anything they wanted, as long as it would fit into the *Mirrodin* world. Designers then fashioned mechanics around the nifty art. **Drill Skimmer** is the only one I can remember off the top of the ol' noggin. This is not something that the Creative Team makes a practice of doing. Apparently, it did not prove to be as successful as the team had hoped. Perhaps **Magic** artists feel more comfortable working with the descriptions they are given. Maybe they just don't feel they know enough about **Magic** to step out on the limb. Or, perhaps they just like to have a target to shoot at. Whatever the reasons are, I think **Magic** art ends up being as cool as it is because of the interplay between the artists and the creative folks at Wizards. Everybody gets to do what they do best, and we all get to reap the rewards.



*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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