

Shuffle Your Library: The Book History of Magic: The Gathering

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Abstract

The colossally popular *Magic: The Gathering* trading card game boasts over 40 million players, over 22,000 unique cards, and a healthy competitive circuit. Now nearing its 20-year anniversary, Magic has entered the digital world with their Arena game, which includes animations, voice acting, and online play. With a new set of cards released quarterly, Magic is an incredibly dynamic game... and at the heart of it all is books.

Magic has a unique and subtle relationship with books and their physical forms, from the design of the cards to resemble book covers, to the in-game terminology for them – a player’s ‘library’. Books feature heavily in the ‘flavour’, or story elements of the cards, as characters read, steal, destroy, and exist around them. In the recent Strixhaven expansion, this connection is more explicit: key plot points hinge on the expansive ‘Biblioplex’, inhabited by Codie the humanised codex and filled with spellbooks. Codie is also an animated ‘pet’ character in Arena, where they express delight at their player’s successes and jeer the opponent.

This paper examines Codie, the Biblioplex, and the aesthetics and mechanics of various cards through a material culture lens, tracing their origin to real books and places, or considering the creative ways the game’s designers have interpreted the concept of ‘the book’. Through conversations with writers and artists at Wizards of the Coast, Magic’s parent company, the paper further seeks to uncover how the game’s designers use resources from special collections libraries and museums.

Keywords: book history, bibliography, game studies, digital culture, material culture

Introduction



Figure 1 (left): Jayemdae Tome card from *Magic: The Gathering* (2015) with art by Donato Giancola
Figure 2 (right): Alaundo the Seer card from *Magic: The Gathering* (2022) with art by Aurore Folny

The colossally popular trading card game *Magic: The Gathering* boasts over 40 million players, over 22,000 unique illustrated cards, and an ever-expanding collection of lore that adds dimension to the gameplay. Although it features many fantastic settings, the world of *Magic* does not exist in a vacuum; it draws from an array of real-world objects and media to create worlds that feel both new and, at the same time, accessibly familiar. One item that features heavily in the lore, mechanics, and aesthetics of *Magic* is the book. Books permeate the many worlds of *Magic* in both a physical and functional sense. Cursed tomes, libraries, and book-devouring monsters are common features of card art and accompanying stories. And within the lore of the game, the cards themselves are meant to represent books. *Magic*'s relationship with books and their physical forms comes from the creators' innate conceptual knowledge of books, but also direct referencing of specific objects, drawing on personal collections, on-site library visits, as well as a healthy dose of general internet image scouring.

As part of my ongoing efforts to educate about book history via social media – situating exploration and analysis to meet people where they are – I have pursued *Magic*'s relationships with books through entwined strands. I have used card databases to begin the task of quantifying how books are used in card art. I have interviewed artists of selected cards to get a sense of where the inspiration for the books, scrolls, libraries, archives, and other bibliographic art and mechanical features come from. And I have used Twitter to share findings, and to engage audiences in the *Magic* community and the bookish community with the aim of enticing them to learn more about each other. Artists' experiences highlight friction

between the popular understanding of digitisation -- which has a heavy focus on the text -- and the intentions of institutional digitisation practice, which aims to record the physical container of the text in some form. Many people outside academia and the general milieu of rare books still understand digitisation primarily as a way to read text on a computer rather than on a paper page, instead of as an access medium that provides points of entry for both material and textual study. By examining the bibliographic aspects of the gameplay and art of Magic through a material culture lens, we can form an image of how physical bibliographic concepts are translated into the game. This illuminates how books are used by one artistic audience as conduits to draw players into fantasy setting of a specific game, but also how libraries make their collections accessible.

Background: *Magic: The Gathering* as a Bookish Game

The bibliographic specifics of *Magic: The Gathering*, which I will also refer to simply as Magic, will be clearer with a basic understanding of the setting of the game, and its mechanics in general. Magic was created by American mathematician Richard Garfield and is published by games company Wizards of the Coast. The first set of Magic cards was released in August 1993. The basic concept of the gameplay of Magic is that the players are Planeswalkers – magical beings that can move between different planes of reality – and they are engaging in a wizardly duel by casting spells and summoning creatures. The cards represent these creatures and spells, as well as the magical energy needed to cast them. To win, a player must get their opponent's life total to zero by attacking them with creatures and spells.

In Magic terminology, a player's deck of cards is called a library. The idea is that a player can summon creatures and cast spells to defeat their opponent from 'some kind of magical book', as Magic's head designer Mark Rosewater (2009) calls it. One method of winning the game is by making your opponent draw all of their cards, thus depleting their library and making them unable to draw any more magical knowledge from it. This concept is reflected in the design for the backs of cards, which is standard across each set. It loosely resembles a mottled calf binding with a central panel, à la the early 18th-century Cambridge style. The book form was further reinforced in the packaging of the earliest starter decks, whose boxes featured page edges and even a bookmark.

Each creature and spell has a different energy cost referred to in-game as mana. There are five colors of mana – white, blue, black, red, and green – each generated by a specific kind of card called land. Each color has its own associated meanings in-game: for example, red is the color of passion, and green the color of nature and growth. A player needs different colors of mana to cast different creatures and spells, and builds their deck around a single color or, more commonly, around a combination of two or more colors. Cards that feature books tend to require blue mana for casting, with blue being the color of intellect, knowledge and learning.

Beyond the intrinsic bookishness – a term described by Jessica Pressman (2020: 1) as ‘creative acts that engage the physicality of the book within a digital culture, in modes that may be sentimental, fetishistic, radical’ – of the overarching game concept, books make frequent appearances in card art. Wizards of the Coast contracts individual artists to illustrate Magic cards after the cards’ mechanics have been devised by the game designers. Numerous writers, artists, and developers collaborate to create and release a new set of cards every quarter. These sets are generally conceptually related, but take place across numerous very different settings – but even in particularly alien realms, we often find a codex or a scroll. Broadly, if a book is featured as the main subject of a card, it implies that the spell or creature will have some effect on your or your opponent’s deck. But these cards also build out the fictional settings and feel of each set, creating a story ‘identity through the possession and presentation of books’ (Pressman, 2020: 12).

For example, take the card Rousing Read, from the Core 2021 set. Rousing Read is an Enchantment that can be applied to a creature card – in-game, its effects benefit the person playing the card, and the combination of its mechanic and its card art tell a story. First, when played, this enchantment requires the player to draw two cards (i.e., turn pages in their magical tome) and discard a card (i.e., prioritise the information they wish to retain). Then, the creature to which this enchantment is applied gets a power boost and, importantly, flying. When a creature has the ‘flying’ ability, that means it cannot be blocked by most other creatures. Finally, to make the narrative of the card more explicit, the so-called ‘flavor text’ in italics reads ‘Great literature can transport the reader’. The subject of the card art, literally flying away from attackers on wings made of book pages, takes the card’s effect and places it in context within the set’s broader narrative.

Selecting for Bookishness

In order to get a sense of how many cards across all Magic sets feature books in their art, I searched the Gatherer and Scryfall card databases using the following bibliographic key words:

book, tome, codex, library, librarian, archivist, archive, page, read, scroll,
biblio-, folio, grimoire

As of late 2022, out of around 22,000 cards, this turned up approximately 105 cards. But this does not quite paint the whole picture: many cards feature books as important elements in their art, without using a bibliographical keyword in their name. As an alternate sampling method, I selected six sets, and looked for books in each card in the set. For example, keyword searching only turned up one book card in the 1998 Urza’s Saga set, but in a visual review I found 19 cards that feature books. Some sets have no books: the H. R. Giger-esque New Phyrexia set, released in 2011 and taking more inspiration from science fiction than classic

fantasy, lacks any book cards. The 2021 Strixhaven set is particularly book-heavy, thanks to its setting at a magical university. This set has by far the most book representation of all those I looked at: 71 of 296 cards feature books in their art. However, Strixhaven does not have a particular abundance of cards that affect libraries; many of these books are more setpieces than active elements of the cards. There are many more cards within Magic to be examined bibliographically and from other thematic approaches, and with massive card databases like Gatherer and Scryfall, a lot of interesting dataset analysis could be done.

Bibliographic influence can also be seen in the aesthetics of cards that have nothing to do with books. The land cards from a recent set, Innistrad: Midnight Hunt, are quite clearly inspired by the wood engravings of Gustave Dore. This set has a gothic feel, and Dore's style is an efficient visual shorthand to immerse the player in that sort of distinctly Victorian creepy setting. But this set does not just draw from classic gothic imagery: in the fantastically-named card Hostile Hostel, we see a direct reference to the 'woman running from spooky house' composition, which adorned the covers of numerous gothic romance novels of the 1960s and 70s.

Engagement with Bookish Cards on Social Media

I have posted a series of Twitter threads that take more in-depth looks at the books depicted in specific cards. I did not have any quantifiable goal in mind when I began the #MTGBookHist threads; in addition to fitting in with my educational aims, I simply wanted to showcase the dozens of bibliographic cards in my findings that did not warrant a case study-level analysis but were still of interest. I tagged the official Magic Twitter account into every thread with the intention of demonstrating the kind of study going on with their material outside of gameplay, in addition to a vague hope that they would find this exercise curious enough to retweet it (as of publication, this remains a vague hope).

Taking this exploration and analysis to social media is an effort to meet people where they are, and to engage audiences in the Magic community and the bookish community with the aim of enticing them to learn more about each other. The Twitter format allows for an image-heavy experience: making visual comparisons between card art and various inspirations and sources is easily accomplished over the course of the thread. The thread series is a self-aware example of Books on Screen – it uses the digital format to draw direct connections between how books are presented in media and physical material culture.

Case Studies

I have selected four specific cards as examples to analyse more closely through a material culture/book historical lens. I reached out to the artists for each of these cards and asked them about what resources they used as references, as well as the types of prior knowledge they brought to their assignments. Many of the artists also volunteered information about

the process of working with Wizards of the Coast, and what kinds of materials the company provided them as a starting point.

Some common themes emerged in these artists' interviews – namely, the use of Google image search and Pinterest to locate reference images. Using these image aggregators as a starting point is not surprising – library catalogs can be difficult to navigate even for professionals, say nothing of the numerous proprietary galleries of digitised material that libraries and online repositories maintain. But when questioned about using digitised collections, the artists indicated that they considered such a resource to be more textual than visual, and indicated it was not something they used heavily.

First is Geth's Grimoire from the Darksteel set, released in 2004. This card art was created by Heather Hudson, who has provided the art for 198 other cards. The most striking feature of this book is the human face, which is clearly a reference to the idea of anthropodermic bibliopeggy: the practice of binding a book in human skin. The chain is also featured prominently, an element that pops up in a great deal of fantasy art. The rather creepy design is reflected by the card's effects and flavor text, which indicate that this Grimoire imprisons a spirit that only finds relief when the player opens it (i.e., draws a card from their library). Hudson recalls that she used an 'old Webster's dictionary' as the model for Geth's Grimoire, noting that 'a big unabridged dictionary makes a pretty good tome'. Hudson was working on the art for this card in 2003, in a 'time before the internet' for her; she found many of her references in the pages of National Geographic and around her own home. In terms of the general feel she wants to evoke with her book art, she says that she imagines any of the books she has painted 'would fit into [H. P. Lovecraft's] Miskatonic University or [the Discworld] Unseen University' library.



Figure 3: Geth's Grimoire card from *Magic: The Gathering* (2004) with art by Heather Hudson



Figure 4: Urza's Tome card from *Magic: The Gathering* (2018) with art by Aaron Miller

As Hudson has been working on MTG art since the first sets in the early 90s, she was able to give a peek into how the art direction has developed over the years. She recalls that in these formative years, artists had a huge amount of freedom, for good and for ill. More recently, she describes how 'concept bibles became standard for each story arc... thick stacks of bound photocopies, mailed to the artists with their art orders'.

Next is Urza's Tome, from the 2018 Dominaria set. The art for Urza's Tome was created by Aaron Miller, who has illustrated 113 other Magic cards. Both the form of the book and its setting exhibit high degrees of detail. Beyond the metal furniture of the binding and the brightly gilt edges, the background is immediately recognisable not just as a library, but a magical library, with floating books restrained by chains drifting in the background.

Miller's main inspiration for the setting of this card was the reading room at the Art Institute of Chicago, though he notes he scouted other Chicago library locations. He also used a personal copy of the works of Shakespeare for a reference for the gilt edges, alongside 'a host of images from the internet'. When asked if he could recall if any of the sources he used were provided by libraries – a question I intended to explore his use of resources such as the Folger Library's Bindings Image Collection – he responded by focusing on his use of digitised texts rather than material aspects represented in the digital objects. This may well be poor question wording on my part, but it also reveals a potential gap in the general public's awareness of visual resources that they can find in a library's digital collection. Miller also mentioned that Wizards of the Coast gave him a 'World Book full of concept art and ideas that each set pulls direction from', also noting that, in general, artists have 'a lot of creative freedom within the box of supplies [they] are given'.

Now we come to Tome of the Guildpact, from the 2019 Ravnica Allegiance set. This card was illustrated by Randy Gallegos, who has illustrated 178 other cards for Magic the



Figure 5: Tome of the Guildpact card from *Magic: The Gathering* (2019) with art by Randy Gallegos

Gathering. Again, this book sports excellent metal furniture and a nice chain. But what led me to reach out to Gallegos about his inspirations for this card is the damaged spine, revealing the book's gatherings. Gallegos notes that he used 'a book we have here, a Spanish-language history of Ecuador that is an old family-owned book of my wife's' that has a similar pattern of wear. 'Gnarled' is a common adjective applied to wizards' spellbooks and other magical tomes in fantasy settings. Visible wear on books in card art is both an additional signifier of age, and purposefully included evidence of use. This wear telegraphs a history of manual manipulation – of opening, turning pages, the cracking of a spine, the click of a clasp, a close call with a fireball – even if this consideration is subconscious for a player. It allows them to imagine these books being used, and grants them a point of entry into the fantasy world.

While he also used 'a number of photos of old books, including ones that have chains and such' that he found via online image searches, he expresses a desire for additional visual resources: 'these old books are themselves fascinating as artifacts, even without the information they carry within'. This is another demonstration of the knowledge gap mentioned in the previous card example; even if these artists have knowledge of where to reference objects and settings physically, aggregate search engines remain the most well-known way to navigate to digital objects.

Gallegos was kind enough to include the whole pitch that he was given by Wizards of the Coast for Tome of the Guildpact, which is as follows:

Art Description: --

Setting: RAVNICA

Guild: None (but associated with all the guilds)

Color: Colorless artifact

Location: Unimportant

Action: Show us a large, ornate book bound in leather and metal. The book is shut, and might even be locked. We're looking at its cover, which bears a symbol featuring all ten guild symbols, something like the one seen on [reference to style guide]. We've seen this seal a number of times now, so feel free to deviate from the design and/or make it relatively subtle—maybe embossed? (Do keep the guilds in the same order, please.)

Focus: The book

Mood: Within these pages is the soul of Ravnica.

The physical description – 'large, ornate book bound in leather and metal' – and the mood – 'within these pages is the soul of Ravnica' – are of particular interest. Gallegos blended these two concepts to create an image with the desired narrative weight, giving the book evidence of wear to communicate its importance through the implication of use. His inclusion of a hand for scale also acts as a conduit for a viewer to imagine touching the book themselves.

The final example is Codie, Vociferous Codex from the 2021 Strixhaven set. Codie's artist is Daniel Ljunggren, who has illustrated 175 other cards. This is another book with a face, but different from Geth's Grimoire; in this case, this is the book's own face, with features created through the skillful placement of metal furniture and ornamentation. Ljunggren notes



Figure 6: Codie, Vociferous Codex card from *Magic: The Gathering* (2021) with art by Daniel Ljunggren

that he started from the idea of a book with a polished stone in the center of its binding, which he used as a jumping-off point to make Codie have a single central eye. Codie's metal eyebrow serves no codicological purpose beyond decoration, but Ljunggren says he imagines Codie's nose-like clasp to be fully functional. Codie moves around with the assistance of a wrought iron book stand.

In addition to the artistic pitch for Codie, Wizards gave Ljunggren direction on the 'tone/attitude' of the card. Codie was designed to be a 'grumpy knowledgeable tome walking around questioning the students' presumed lack of skills'. Ljunggren was particularly focused on getting these character traits across, he recalls, 'making it feel like a living being'.

Codie became the mascot for the Strixhaven set, appearing in animated commercials, where he speaks with a New York accent. He also appears as a dynamic pet asset on Arena, the digital version of Magic. Pets do not give the player any in-game advantages, and are more an effort to entice players into buying in-game currency to show off against their opponents. In his translation to an animated character and digital asset, Codie's clasp nose has fused with his eye, rendering the mechanism unusable, but keeping with the aesthetic of Ljunggren's design.

The Codie pet occupies a usually-empty area on the left side of an Arena player's screen, overseeing their actions. He has a number of unique idle animations to reinforce the idea that he is a sentient, animate object, and slightly longer animations for when a player wins or loses a game. In the case of a victory, he hops out of his metal base and spins around, opening his pages with a flourish; in the case of a loss, he closes his eye and woozily falls off of his stand, one of his gatherings sticking out slightly.

I asked Ljunggren specifically if he had any input on these other versions of Codie and their animations, and he reported that he did not. This is an illuminating material culture transmission chain: from an initial, dynamic physical book, to a set of static images on a website, to a static piece of art, and back to a dynamic animated object. It is interesting to observe how the idea of a book shifts and changes between formats, with each instance further distilling and optimising the idea of the codex form to best suit the medium in which it appears.



Figure 7: Codie pet avatar from *Magic: The Gathering Arena*

Conclusion

More study of players' engagement with the visual elements of Magic remains to be done; an avenue of expansion for this research topic is to more directly interface with the art directors of the game, as well as the artists who execute their visions. It would be fruitful to explore how the art directors gauge the visual tastes of the players to develop the aesthetics of their different sets, and how much a consideration of the physical form of the codex contributes to their decision-making. The game designers of Magic develop gameplay with three player archetypes (Rosewater, 2013) in mind; do these archetypes extend to the work of the art department as well? As Wizards of the Coast continues to release new sets, there is no end to novel possibilities for the analysis of how books are incorporated into card art and beyond.

Biographical Note

Allie Alvis is the Curator of Special Collections at the Winterthur Library. They have previously held positions at Type Punch Matrix and the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives, and received their post-graduate degrees from the University of Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow. Allie is also a public bibliographic educator (find them as @Book_historia across social media), and a book collector. They have published and lectured widely on a variety of topics including 16th century arsenical bookbindings, the importance of well-loved books, and the work of English binders Douglas Cockerell and Son.

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