

The Magic MTG's of Planeswalker Art

One thing that I think is kind of cool and isn't really talked about enough is a lot of the art techniques Magic the Gathering uses and how the game can still have a general recognizable vibe, design philosophy, or design tropes in general thanks to the incredible skill, art direction, and vision of many of the artist and art directors. However, to get even more specific, one thing that I have seen people talk about even less is how Planeswalkers generally tend to pop out of their card art while most creatures, spells, and scenes are perfectly contained within the designated card art area.



Also, for the sake of clarity, I am talking strictly about normal card art and not alternate or special edition card art. But getting back to the point, the fact that Planeswalker's usually pop or leak out of their art comes down to, what I would argue at least, are two main design reasons. First off, having the planeswalkers be like the only card type to consistently do this helps draw attention to their importance and how MTG basically revolves around planeswalkers. Heck, canonically every MTG player is a planeswalker themselves.

To go even further, if Magic the Gathering had a main character it would probably be Jace or Chandra... BUT if MTG had a second main character it would be planeswalkers in general. This makes sense when you consider the fact that generally planeswalkers are one of the few things that can traverse the different planes of the multiverse, much less with any sort of ease (well they WERE during the time of writing this but the events of March of the Machine seems to have given non-planeswalkers more options for traveling to other planes. But a lot of the points I'm mentioning still stand as planeswalkers seem to still have the easiest time traveling from plane to plane and don't need to wait for portals or interplanar omenpaths) and because of this we tend to follow the narratives and stories of planeswalkers the most and they tend to be some of the more consistently recurring characters, as they are not as bound to specific planes

(meaning that they can easily show up in just about any set if the writers want them to). The second reason one may want to show planeswalker's leaving card art is more lore-related. See, it's well known that planeswalkers can traverse from plane to plane (hence the name planeswalker). So, by having planeswalkers leaving or extending outside of their card frames you are physically showing that planeswalkers are not bound to planes in the same way that normal entities are. In essence they are capable of leaving or simply stepping out of the world or place depicted on the card, unlike most normal creatures.



A planeswalker's ability to just leave planes or areas just about whenever they want is also something we see addressed in the story of MTG.



"I've heard it said that a Planeswalker is someone who can always run from danger. But Gideon's right: we're also the ones who can choose to stay." —Jace Beleren

Planeswalkers have a level of choice and freedom that most other creatures do not have. Honestly, the artistic technique we see on planeswalker cards reminds me of how comic artists may play around with things like the panels by doing things like having characters reach outside the panels to show how powerful a character is, that a character is not bound by normal logic, and/or that the character/panel in question is just super important.



The panel above is from the Webcomic Gunnerkrigg Court by Tom Siddell from page 1068 (<https://www.gunnerkrigg.com/?p=1068>) and it depicts the character Coyote. I wish I could think of more strong examples (and feel free to leave your own). In this page we can see Coyote's reality warping power emphasized as he begins to reach outside the frame with his hand in the second panel and then in the third panel he takes in a more abstract form as he freely spills out into the areas below and next to the panel. You could also argue that this shows that what we are usually seeing is actually not Coyote's true/only form and that he is a being that is just on another level of existence. He is not bound by the same physics, rules, and laws that most other characters are.

Back to MTG though, I know some of you are inevitably going to say "Okay cool, but what about Marit Lage?" and my response to that is "Wow what a throwback..."



The rest of you are probably going to ask about the Eldrazi for the same reason.

Now, the Eldrazi aren't Planeswalkers so despite their ability to travel from one plane to another they don't use the exact same art techniques that planeswalkers do because they are telling a slightly different story. One thing some may notice about the Eldrazi is the fact that they fuck with the borders of the card. More specifically you can see the rest of their art near the border of the card and outside the rest of their art frames in the default printing.



Not to mention that with a lot of them you can see the entirety of the art behind the various text boxes in general. This shows us that while, yes, the Eldrazi are similar to planeswalkers in that they are free to travel from plane to plane they are different in that they aren't bound to our frame of reference of the symbolic frame of planes we are seeing. Unlike planeswalkers, the true body of the Eldrazi resides outside of any plane and within the Blind Eternities themselves. A fact that one could argue is kind of represented by the fact that there is more of the Eldrazi outside of the picture frame.

In essence, if you only look at the card's art frame then you are not getting the full picture of their existence and their true form doesn't even really fit into the scene they inhabit so we have to zoom all the way out and look at them from outside the moment/world/plane that they are currently inhabiting. This is also further emphasized with just how fucking massive the Eldrazi titans themselves are. They are so big that they don't even completely fit into the card

they are on despite having almost the entirety of the card to portray their form. Their physical form in of itself is not the Eldrazi's true form and to look upon only its physical form, massive as they may be, does not create a complete picture of what they are. Additionally, their strange card art and borders just highlights them as unusual, important, eye-catching, or something you don't see everyday. Especially when you compare them to normal creatures.



The fact that the Eldrazi extend outside of where a Magic card's art is normally contained could also reference their ability to travel from plane to plane. However, the way they do so is different from that of Planeswalkers. While planeswalkers are capable of crossing the borders of planes and stepping from one metaphorical scene to another Eldrazi just don't have any borders, at least not in the same way a normal plane dwelling entity does. Planeswalkers jump from plane to plane but Eldrazi merely move in, out, and through the Blind Eternities to get to another plane. Even then, as mentioned earlier, it is not their true form that enters a plane as their true form still lies within the Blind Eternities themselves. So in essence the Eldrazi are just sort of "reaching" into planes they want to interact with.

I guess if I had to explain this in the simplest way possible I would say that the fact that planeswalkers almost always have bits of their body sticking out of the art frame is a representation of both their importance and the extra level of freedom and movement that comes with planeswalking. A freedom that normal creatures, spells, and other things don't have access to.

Additionally, in the cases of instants, sorceries, and enchantments. planeswalkers usually seem unable to cast spells mid planeswalk (at least to my knowledge). Casting spells from the Blind Eternities if you're a planeswalker isn't something that you can just do which would explain why these kinds of spells would still be more contained within their art frame even when they are being used by or associated with planeswalkers.



Then you have artifacts. While some artifacts can be brought to different planes by a planeswalker it is important to remember that artifacts are a way WAY broader and vague category than a lot of Magic players seem to assume. While artifacts can represent some types of inorganic material or technology, most of which a planeswalker could take with them when they planeswalk, they can also just represent inanimate objects. Which can often include things that are organic and thus cannot be taken off a plane via planeswalking.



For example, most food we see is composed of organic material and thus attempting to planeswalk with them would cause them to be destroyed in the blind eternities. However, it's more likely that artifacts not having the same border crossing art treatment as planeswalkers is simply connected to the fact that even artifact that can be safely carried when planeswalking do not necessarily have the ability to planeswalk on their own or by themselves and would thus need a planeswalker, or I guess an Omenpath as of March of the Machines, in order to leave a plane. Their ability to leave a plane is not intrinsic to them in the same way it is for planeswalkers.

Wrenn and Six 

Legendary Planeswalker — Wrenn 

- +1** : Return up to one target land card from your graveyard to your hand.
- 1** : Wrenn and Six deals 1 damage to any target.
- 7** : You get an emblem with “Instant and sorcery cards in your graveyard have retrace.”

217/254 M
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Ob Nixilis, the Adversary 

Legendary Planeswalker — Nixilis 

Casualty X. The copy isn't legendary and has starting loyalty X. (As you cast this spell, you may sacrifice a creature with power X. When you do, copy this spell. The copy becomes a token.)

- +1** : Each opponent loses 2 life unless they discard a card. If you control a Demon or Devil, you gain 2 life.
- 2** : Create a 1/1 red Devil creature token with “When this creature dies, it deals 1 damage to any target.”
- 7** : Target player draws seven cards and loses 7 life.

206/281 M
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Venser, the Sojourner 

Planeswalker — Venser 

- +2** : Exile target permanent you own. Return it to the battlefield under your control at the beginning of the next end step.
- 1** : Creatures are unblockable this turn.
- 8** : You get an emblem with “Whenever you cast a spell, exile target permanent.”

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Sorin the Mirthless 

Legendary Planeswalker — Sorin 

- +1** : Look at the top card of your library. You may reveal that card and put it into your hand. If you do, you lose life equal to its mana value.
- 2** : Create a 2/3 black Vampire creature token with flying and lifelink.
- 7** : Sorin the Mirthless deals 13 damage to any target. You gain 13 life.

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Meanwhile, the art of the Eldrazi and their associated cards along with how said art plays with the art frame tends to represent that while they aren't planeswalkers they aren't limited to a plane and the metaphorical frame that normal creatures are. Their influence extends from outside of our frame of reference and comprehension.



As I mentioned earlier we are only focusing on default card art and not alternative art, special editions, secret layers, etc. because they often have an incentive to break these rules in order to make more interesting art that would otherwise normally not make sense in a given set.

However, even excluding these alts there are still exceptions. For example, Tibalt, Cosmic Imposter is a planeswalker card that depicts Tibalt sitting cleanly inside his frame.



On one hand I think it can be easily argued that this is simply due to his posture and position within the piece. But that then raises the question why would the art be done this way then? If we actually take a second to put ourselves in the shoes of an artist or art director who wants to keep the motif of planeswalkers going one could easily do so by simply raising Tibalt's position higher so that his arm barely sticks out of the frame, outstretching his right arm so that his fingers stick out a little bit, or even just making one of the many coins raining down on him spill out of the bottom of the frame ever so slightly. Not to mention that you can still see a bit of his art behind the textbox like every other planeswalker so why would you stop there when it comes to planeswalkers. These factors don't rule out the possibility that it was a coincidence but make me lean more towards the idea that this might have actually been intentional on the part of one or more parties. I think a possible answer lies in Kaldheim's story in which Tibalt disguises himself as one of the plane's inhabitants and gods, Valki, God of Lies (which I have to admit I find a little funny because if I was going to disguise myself as someone choosing the one guy who's famously known for being untrustworthy, and a liar is quite the move).



From this perspective we could argue that the reason Tibalt, Cosmic Imposter, sits inside his frame is because it is supposed to mirror Valki in the sense that Tibalt is disguising himself as one of the normal inhabitants of Kaldheim and would thus appear to be on their level from a sort of metaphysically metaphorical perspective. So in this way the art of Tibalt on this card shows a metaphorical connection to his disguise of Valki.

Thanks for reading, or skimming, this article. What's your favorite planeswalker art that is not an alternative art and why? Also, I do have more articles if you're interested such as pieces discussing the Color Pie in relation to Kamigawa, Innistrad's factions, and longer form pieces discussing the Color Pie in general, such as White and Blue. I hope to see you later.

You can check out the list of all the articles I've written so far with this link:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Ita3Eh8P2SdNtF9eCorKbhchtLXrrKJheK5_6OpRFSs/edit