Bad Baby Lich Lords: Narrative & Cartooning in Card Games

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by Taylor Dow

Overview

Project Statement
Bad Baby Lich Lords is a card game about infant necromancers raising the dead. Its art direction prioritizes excellence in cartooning and legibility in character design, with cards forgoing the cramped, text-heavy designs of popular card games like Magic: The Gathering in favor of full-art, character-driven card faces. Its colorful style of cartooning and character design recalls the spirit of 1980s trading cards like Garbage Pail Kids, with every card persisting an art object outside of gameplay. Card names share an underlying spirit of mischief and use poetic devices—like puns and alliteration—to draw connections between characters, setting up and delivering punchlines and callbacks as cards are revealed. The sum of these parts constitutes an antidote to the current landscape of collectible card games, in which mechanics and market value supersede visual merit.

Setting
Bad Baby Lich Lords tells the story of a colorful fantasy world ruled by an ancient titan called the Lich King. The Lich King’s skeletal body is immeasurably huge and partially buried, his rib cage forming a mountainous curved perimeter around his valley kingdom. On the western ridge of this valley, the Lich King’s sunken skull sits like a mountain. Ever watchful, his lengthening shadow brings a nightly reminder of enduring omnipotence.

Exhausted from a thousand years of odious rule, the Lich King decides to simplify his job by casting a powerful death spell across his kingdom, instantly killing every living creature. He then turns to his children, a pair of hundred-foot-tall infant necromancers, and forbids them from entering the valley while he rests. He passes into a deep slumber. At this point, players enter the picture: They each assume the role of a “Bad Baby Lich Lord”—one of the Lich King’s giant children—as they sneak into their sleeping father’s rib cage to resurrect the dead.
**Historical antecedents**

**The tarot**

Early card games are thought to have originated in 9th-century China with “leaf games,” woodblock-printed cards featuring both words and images for use in gambling. A number of other decks followed, including 48-card Persian decks and eventually the 52-card Egyptian decks that would move their way to Europe in the 14th century. These decks were always made up of suit cards that prioritized iconic graphic design, with the nine of cudgels depicting nine flat, graphic cudgels, and so on.

Tarot introduced an additional set of ornately designed face cards to this template. The game was commissioned by wealthy aristocrats in 15th-century Italy who wanted more variety in their gambling games; 22 face cards were added and christened the “major arcana.” Major arcana cards did not belong to a suit and were given dramatic names like “The Chariot” and “Judgement,” with lavish illustrations to match. These designs reflected the priorities and concerns of Italian court life (“The Pope” got his own card) and were never intended for use in divination or storytelling. Additionally, tarot’s remaining suit cards were christened the “minor arcana” and were expanded to include a total of fifty-six cards.

**“Reading” cards**

While the 22 new face cards of the major arcana would seem to lend themselves to narrative interpretation, tarot resisted being “read” for another three hundred years. In 1781, a protestant pastor and freemason named Antoine Court De Gébelin published several essays touting the tarot as an “occult masterpiece” and advocating for its use in esoteric ritual. He erroneously claimed that tarot cards were derived from the ancient Egyptian Book of Thoth, and that in order to restore the deck to its Egyptian “origins,” aspects of the 22 trump cards should be redesigned to more accurately reflect life in ancient Egypt. These changes, made before the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, were often bizarre. For instance, The Chariot was changed to depict a cart pulled by sphinxes instead of horses.

This new, “more Egyptian” tarot went on to become wholly integrated into western esoteric magic. Prominent secret societies like London’s *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn* commissioned custom decks for use in a range of occult rituals. The details of these rituals were shared with the public by Aleister Crowley in 1909 via *The Equinox*, a journal he created for the express purpose of leaking secret occult practices.

Also in 1909, Illustrator Pamela Colman Smith and mystic Arthur Edward Waite published the *Waite-Smith tarot deck*, which went on to become the most popular tarot deck ever printed. Waite was himself a Golden Dawn member, and based his collaboration with Smith on Golden Dawn Cards. Changes were once again made to move the cards closer to their supposed Egyptian origins. Consequently, the new occult tarot, now expressly a tool for divination, spread across Europe and the Americas. This was fueled by a Reformation-induced fad for mysticism and the occult, with many people considering the tarot to be “a gateway or a channel that would facilitate communication with jinn, angels, and other exulted heavenly hosts.”

Major arcana cards such as The Tower, The Devil, and The Fool feature imagery so influential as to be inescapable. For instance, Éliphas Lévi’s lithographic portrait of Baphomet, copied and spread across the world in various tarot decks via “The Devil” card, has become one of the most popular representations of Satan and Satanism, appearing in countless media such as Netflix’s *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018). Other contemporary examples of the major arcana in pop culture include the James Bond film *Live and Let Die* (1973), J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005), the anime *Death Note* (2006), and the *Persona* (1996-present) series of video games.

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<td>I</td>
<td>The Mountebank</td>
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<td>II</td>
<td>The Magician</td>
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<td>III</td>
<td>The Popess</td>
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<td>The High Priestess</td>
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<td>XXIII</td>
<td>Judgement</td>
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<tr>
<td>XXIV</td>
<td>The World</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Above

My super awesome illustration that could span 1, 2, 3, 4 columns or the whole page. This super awesome caption is set in Maple.

Figure 1

“Cary Collection of Playing Cards,” Italy, ca. 1500. 98 x 57 mm. (card); 304 x 217 mm. (sheet).

Yale University Library
Collectible and Trading Card Games

A great number of new collectible and playing cards emerged over the next three hundred years, spurred by the rise of consumer culture and mass media. Tea cards, cigar cards, trade cards, bubblegum cards, sticker cards, entertainment trading cards, action figure cards, sports cards, collectible card games, living card games, and eventually digital card games, would all be produced alongside countless new tarot decks. Where tarot decks and playing cards were always designed with usability in mind, the priorities of newer formats shifted toward collectibility, and were formally shaped by the primary and secondary market of collectibles.

Garbage Pail Kids (1985)

The 1980s saw an explosion in the production of collectibles, by that time a pillar of industrial American kitsch. Prominent cultural interests in parody, toys, horror, and gross-out humor, coupled with better offset printing, resulted in a golden age of trading cards, among them Garbage Pail Kids. Drawn by John Pound and published by Topps, a prominent publisher of baseball cards, the first Garbage Pail Kids cards checked every box in the zeitgeist when it launched in 1985. Essentially a collection of colorful, cartoon character paintings, each Garbage Pail Kids card depicted a grotesque, doll-like infant (the cards were created as a parody of Cabbage Patch Kids) doing something awful. Cards were beautifully rendered, frequently violent, and seemingly designed to make parents uncomfortable, depicting young children being run over by bulldozers, smoking cigarettes, or being hit by lightning. Each piece of art could be opened with two different names, doubling the number of unique cards that could be produced per painting. This is a phenomenon unique to trading cards and continues to have an interesting effect on secondary market sales: While every Garbage Pail Kid painting has two names, there is almost always one name that collectors agree is the better of the two, resulting in a “truer” version of the card, alongside what then becomes a sort of bootleg by comparison. The success or failure of a given name is reflected in the card’s resale value. For instance, the most famous Garbage Pail Kid, “Adam Bomb,” (fig. 2) sold for a high of 30,000 USD on eBay in 2021. “Blasted Billy,” (fig. 3) the same card with a different name, sold for a high of 15,000 USD the same year.
Flavor Text

Many cards in *Magic* had no abilities at all. Garfield and Wizards filled these cards instead with narrative writing set in italics, which they called “flavor text.” The idea was borrowed from action figure cards and role-playing games of the 1980s, which often used italics to denote quotes from the show or movie the toy was from. In *Magic*, flavor text was purely narrative and had no effect on gameplay. The best examples displayed a fascinating play between word and image, each illuminating the other, often to humorous effect. Crucially, the larger world flavor text often gestured toward was not expounded upon in supplemental material; It was up to players to make connections between cards. This encouraged playful and imaginative world-building, which was often sparked through unexpected combinations of cards encountered during play with others.

As *Magic* grew in popularity, Wizards of the Coast began to fill in these narrative gaps. Novels were published alongside each set, online databases of lore were assembled, art direction tightened and became more uniform, and a canon emerged.

For many players, the narrative mystery once evoked by a piece of flavor text that gestured toward, for instance, the mating rituals of treefolk (fig. 4), was replaced with a Google search.

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**Figure 4**

Myrfor, Jesper. “Ironroot Treefolk.” 1993. 3.5x2.5” (card). Wizard of the Coast.

Nintendo’s Pokémon Trading Card Game borrowed a great deal from Magic in its mechanics and narrative construction. While it was less popular as a game, Pokémon cards were extremely successful as collectibles. If Pokémon was less fun than Magic, its cards were more beautiful. They demonstrated a stronger cartoon sensibility, which worked well in the minuscule format. This was perhaps the result of the creatures themselves having been designed for the original Gameboy, which required incredibly strong shape language and silhouette construction to function on a tiny, low resolution screen, in addition to the considerable challenge of standing apart from more than a hundred fifty other monsters.

As in Akira Toriyama’s ubiquitous Dragon Quest and Dragon Ball series, Pokémon featured monsters that ascended through developmental stages, becoming more powerful and changing their appearance along the way. When looking at a series of these “evolutions,” players could infer narrative by observing visual connections between card names. Some of these were more straightforward than others, with cards like Bulbasaur / Ivysaur / Venusaur unfolding like a time-lapse film of a growing flower. Others were much stranger and required greater imaginative leaps, as with Exeggcute (fig. 5) and Exeggutor (fig. 6). These two cards tell the evolutionary tale of a half-dozen psychic “eggs” (flavor text: “often mistaken for eggs”)

who transform into a three-headed, teleporting coconut tree equipped with an attack called “big eggspllosion.”

Pokémon from the same evolutionary chain were not necessarily drawn by the same artist, nor even in the same medium. This underscored that the world of Pokémon was open to interpretation. Unfortunately, the gameplay of the Pokémon trading card game was clunky and confusing, featuring a central “ante” mechanic that required the losing player to actually transfer ownership of a card to the winning player. Ultimately, the game’s mechanics lacked the elegance and immediacy of the cartoon monsters it was built around.


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Taylor Dow

**Cartooning**

**Visual language in use**

One problem with the amount of rendering devoted to an individual card in *Magic: The Gathering* is that it prioritizes a kind of immersion that is not actually immersive at all. *Magic* cards call upon the tools developed by realist painters to display immaculately rendered, anatomically complex figures placed in spatially deep environments. This vivid attention to detail leaves little room for reader interpretation, a problem that has only intensified in recent years. Art directors now apply tighter and more uniform direction across *Magic*’s many properties: a sprawling network of books, animation, video games, and more than 20,000 unique cards. This encourages the culture of “correctness” (the term “correct” is commonly used by *Magic* players when evaluating what card to play) that permeates playgroups, discouraging interpretation and, ironically, play.

It stands to reason that the antidote to overly complicated art lies in simplification. Cartoonists have long been in the business of placing legibility and playful execution above illusion. Scott McCloud writes in *Understanding Comics* (1993) that cartoonists are “not so much eliminating details as [they] are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning,’ an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t.” It stands to reason that the antidote to overdrawing lies in simplification.

Cartoonists use a host of tools to achieve maximum legibility and personality. Many of these tools are simply not available to artists working within realism. This toolbox is itemized in what cartoonist Ivan Brunetti calls the “Five C’s of cartooning:” calligraphy, composition, clarity, consistency, and communication. Each of the “Five C’s” is essentially a tool of amplification. For instance, calligraphy (use and quality of line) is usually removed entirely from realistic work even though it is a great aid to readability at a distance.6

Brunetti asserts that “the challenge of cartooning is finding a good midpoint, where the finished drawing is solid and unmistakable but still retains some of the ‘oomph’ of the doodle.” He also notes that doing so gets us “closer to the ‘idea’ or essence of the thing being drawn.” Much of the thrill of cards and card games comes in the act of flipping them over—the elemental surprise of turning a stone over to find a creature living beneath it. The better the cartoon on the other side, the more impactful the flip becomes.

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Fig. 7
**Mechanics & Methodology**

**Flipping Cards**
Players in *Bad Baby Lich Lords* flip cards over often. Every card in the game has two sides: a “corpse” side, and a “raised” side. The corpse side of a card is rendered in desaturated browns and tans, while the raised side is brightly colored. Additionally, while figures on both sides of the card retain the same silhouette, they are rendered as a skeleton on the corpse side. This means that every time a player brings a card “back to life” by flipping it raised-side-up, it activates a 2-frame animation: a satisfying burst of color, the restoration of skin, and the opening of cartoon eyes.

**Actions**
*Bad Baby Lich Lords* cards are visual first, textual second. Where most collectible card games include a significant amount of type, cards in *Bad Baby Lich Lords* are full-art on both sides, with the sole exception of a card’s name. This is made possible by action icons. All of a card’s mechanical information is represented by a row of 1 to 3 “action icons,” simple colored symbols indicating what a given card does when flipped face-up. Action icons and the mechanics associated with them also have narrative implications. For instance, cards with the “friendship” action, represented by a heart icon, can move other characters to their own part of the game board, so the two cards can enjoy spending time together.

**Action Icons**
Actions from left to right: fight, friendship, dig, necromancy, boss, move
Factions
Cards in *Bad Baby Lich Lords* are separated into three suits, called factions: *The Freeple Kingdom, The Doorlock Academy,* and *The Noblin Forest.* Each faction has a distinct visual identity enforced by its palette, environmental design, naming conventions, and character design. To encourage active player participation and imaginative readings, the specifics of the three factions are not shared with the player, and so are open to interpretation. By examining cards and playing the game, players are invited to draw their own conclusions.

From a maker’s perspective, I approached card art with specific guidelines for each faction to create consistency and differentiation across the card pool. For instance, each faction is assigned its own section of the color wheel based on the faction’s key color, which appears on the card frame. Each of these key colors also has a distinct value, with Freeple blue being the lightest, Noblin green the middle value, and Zard red the darkest.

Additionally, I created a list of themes and a loose setting for each faction, keeping in mind that I wanted players to have room to imagine significantly different narratives. For the Freeple Kingdom, I imagined a city split cleanly in two between the ruling class and working class. The ruling class was split into three groups, each controlled by three “lizardgods,” who were in charge of religion, finance, or military might, respectively. Using alien technology from the lizardgods, the elites of the city lived in bubbly pink towers, while working class Freeple toiled in neighborhoods overflowing with industrial detritus.

None of this is explained to the player. There are pink, bubbly buildings in the background of many Freeple cards, while some others are staged in shining pink palaces. This connection is specific enough to intrigue, but ambiguous enough to inspire divergent readings.

*Factino Color Palettes*
Images from BBLL cards “Heliumancer,” “Hunky Nymphsquatch,” and “Lizardgod Moxo” demonstrate the three faction palettes.
Character Design Case Study: Romancemancer

Cartooning & iteration
Every character in Bad Baby Lich Lords went through a significant number of iterations before being finalized. The Doorlock Academy card “Romancemancer,” for example, began as a small pen drawing in a sketchbook. He was covered with hearts, held a love potion, sported a heart-shaped hat and staff, and wore fishnets with heels. I liked him instantly; he was simple and charming and I loved the name. For his second sketch, I wanted to make a drawing that looked more “professional” than the sketch, but over-compensated by rendering with too much detail: suddenly his love potion was filled with tiny bubbles and his cape was embroidered with a hundred metal spikes. The drawing looked great zoomed in on my tablet, but it looked terrible printed on a three-inch card. The drawing was falling into the realist trap I was attempting to remedy.

Somewhere between drawing the second and third versions, the Doorlocks became “mean little rich kids,” a fresher take on the trope, and an excuse to give them gigantic heads and eyes that would read well from a distance. I implemented these changes into Romancemancer. I changed his staff into a pen as a step towards specificity—the old heart staff felt generic, now he was a writer. I tried replacing his love potion with an ink bottle, since love potions are ethically murky, but opted for parchment in the end. I redesigned his cape for an improved silhouette and to push his torso forward, and added some love letter minions to activate the space and underscore the potential powers of his magic ink.

The resulting character is quickly recognizable, narratively intriguing (how does that pen work?), and satisfyingly discordant (his specialty is love, but he looks standoffish).
**Development**

*Bad Baby Lich Lords* will be published by Olympia-based tabletop game company Heart of the Deernicorn in 2022. The game has been play-tested by myself and a small team every week for the past year. At the time of this writing, we are testing Version 31, which has undergone countless changes from its original design.

Bad Baby Lich Lords is playtested weekly by myself and two game designers, Ross Cowman and Pat Kemp. We use a digital prototype deck (fig. 8), which features up-to-date art so that the look of a card can be evaluated alongside its mechanics. This art is taken from sketchbooks or works in progress and is often rough or haphazardly assembled. Also present are a number of fully colored works from much older versions of the game, drawn before the desired look was achieved.

When I first set out to make a ruleset for *Bad Baby Lich Lords*, I was simply trying to make a game where players wanted to lose. It was *Magic: The Gathering*, except players were competing to die first, and the best cards were the weakest ones. I liked this idea because I was sick of playing games about beating each other up.

In the end, we couldn’t figure out how to make the “play to lose” angle work, and the game became one about infant gods restoring life to a dead world. The goal of the game is analogous to the goal of the project, ostensibly an attempt to breathe new life into a beloved but underserved form, one distorted by its own economic gravity, prescriptive in its narrative, visually uninspiring, and far too often played by gigantic, destructive babies.
Balkian Bishop
Noblin Unicycle

Gutter Faeries
Endnotes

4 Ibid. 361.

Bibliography


Bibliography (cont.)


Taylor Dow

This book was created at Washington University in St. Louis, in the MFA Illustration and Visual Culture program in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, in the spring of 2021.

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