THE MAGIC OF COMMUNITY: GATHERING OF CARD PLAYERS AND SUBCULTURAL EXPRESSION

Travis J. Limbert

A Thesis

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Committee:

Dr. Marilyn Motz, Advisor

Dr. Esther Clinton
When *Magic: the Gathering* was released in 1993, it was the first trading card game. It paved the way for the trading card game subculture and market that exists today. This thesis explores the implications of this subculture and the ways it can be thought of as an urban leisure subculture. This thesis also discusses *Magic*’s unique community, which has been instrumental in the game’s success over the last two decades. *Magic*’s community is created symbiotically, through official support by Wizards of the Coast, and the parent company Hasbro, as well as the usage and interaction by the fans and players. It is this interaction that creates a unique community for *Magic*, which leads to the game’s global popularity, including its tremendous growth since 2010. This thesis looks at trade publications, articles written about *Magic*, player responses collected through online surveys, and other works to create an extensive work on *Magic* and its community. This thesis focuses on how the community is important to the consumption of copyrighted cultural texts and how this creates of meaning in players’ lives.
To my parents, James and Jona, who always encouraged me.
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INTRODUCTION. THE MAGIC OF COMMUNITY: GATHERING OF CARD PLAYERS AND SUBCULTURAL EXPRESSION

In the 2008 documentary *Nerdcore Rising*, an exploration of a new genre that combines nerdy subject matter and hip-hop musical style, *Magic: the Gathering* is depicted as a dorky and cumbersome game.\(^1\) A segment of the documentary includes a piece of sped-up video of a band member trying to teach another person how to play the game, which takes over two hours and fifteen minutes. He is mocked by the other band members who see *Magic* as beneath them, despite the fact that their musical genre is based on the principles of nerdy delights. The band’s frontman and focus of the film, MC Frontalot, even has a song titled “Hassle the Dorkening,” which directly mocks *Magic the Gathering*.

In a 2001 documentary entitled *Hell House*, about religious Halloween haunted houses meant to scare people into believing in Jesus, *Magic* is considered an Occult practice.\(^2\) During the script writing for a scene to be featured in the hell house about a school kid who joins the Occult, *Magic* is considered one of the gateways into the satanic group. While it is clear from the discussion that the two people writing the script do not actually know what *Magic* is (they cannot agree on the name of the game or what it really entails), they still perceive the game as demonic and a dark influence on children’s lives. It is not surprising then that Wizards of the Coast, the company that produces *Magic*, has made a deliberate attempt to remove demons, demonic imagery and content from *Magic* for many years to help distance it from such perceptions that had possessed their other major brand, *Dungeons and Dragons*, for decades.\(^3\)

What exactly is this *Magic: the Gathering* game: is it a geeky niche indulgence or a satanic force that will corrupt vulnerable young folk? While for many it is a geeky game that involves various levels of engagement, it has nothing more to do with the Occult than Harry
Potter or other fantasy-based properties that are lambasted as anti-Christian. These two
documentaries are examples of how *Magic: the Gathering* is frequently a misunderstood cultural
practice. These films highlight how sometimes people misunderstand what exactly *Magic* entails.
This thesis attempts to dispel some of these pre-existing misconceptions about *Magic* that tend to
come from people with limited knowledge about the game. While *Magic* is nerdy, it is enjoyed
by over twelve million people around the world and generates millions of dollars a year. This
work is an exploration of what exactly *Magic: the Gathering* (aka *Magic* or *MTG*) is, and how a
community is created around the game.

Before I delve too far into my research, I find it important to address my positionality and
experience with *Magic* and how it relates to me as a scholar. Before I was introduced to *Magic*, I
played the *Pokémon* trading card game when it was released in 1998 and I was eleven. This was
my first introduction to the trading card game subculture, which I got into through my
experiences with the handheld Pokémon game the card game is based on. I mostly played the
game with neighborhood kids after school, and would occasionally be able to convince my
mother to drive my sister and me to the Toys-R-U's that was a twenty-minute drive from our
house to play. After a few years of playing that game, I started to grow out of it and wanted to try
something different. I had a few friends who had already switched from *Pokémon* to *Magic* and
had been trying to convince me to do the same.

I began playing *Magic* in late 2001 as something to pass the time with my friends, who
encouraged me and taught me to play. I was thirteen at the time, in middle school, and it was a
casual hobby. I spent the next few years playing every now and then at a friend’s house, on
weekends, and when I was bored. I barely spent any money on cards, and would only buy one or
two booster packs of the newest set. My sophomore year of high school I started to make newer
friends through playing the game and a few of us decided to try to find out what tournament *Magic* was all about. We went to our first few tournaments, did poorly, but enjoyed the experience. This got a group of us interested in getting better, playing more competitively and sinking more energy, time and money into the game. I spent the next two years driving to a town thirty minutes away to play *Magic* on Friday nights, as part of the Friday Night Magic program. It was a small low-scale event, but it allowed me to meet other *Magic* players outside of the friends I went to school with. We would also occasionally convince someone’s parent to drive us down to Columbus (an hour and a half drive one way) for the day to play in pre-release events and other larger statewide tournaments (States and Regionals).

I attended college at Bowling Green State University, moving away from my hometown and friends, but continued to play *Magic* on weekends and during free time. It was about this point I started going to even larger events, traveling hours away to places like Columbus, Detroit, Indianapolis and Cincinnati in hopes of winning a Pro Tour Qualifier or PTQ. The winner of a PTQ would receive an invite and plane ticket to play on *Magic* Pro Tour, which one could only play in by invitation. After countless hours of testing, playing and multiple attempts, I eventually won a PTQ in Detroit to compete in the Pro Tour in Honolulu, Hawaii in the summer of 2009. This tournament was my only experience playing on the Pro Tour circuit and the highest level I have played professionally. Since that event my play and involvement in the tournament aspect of the game has decreased, but I still play.

My experience as a player gives me a background of familiarity with the different aspects of the game, from casual play to the highest level of competition. My experience also covers a wide history of the game, allowing an understanding and appreciation of what the game once was versus what it is today. This allows me to speak with some authority on the game from the
perspective of an active participant within the community. When conducting my research, I found the majority of people writing about and discussing *Magic* in academia were approaching the topic from an outsider perspective. They had very limited experience and knowledge of the game, some minor experience with the game, or played the game in an attempt to research it. My experience and background with the game provides essential and valuable insight which has been absent in the study of this subject area. This allows for a nuanced and knowledgeable discussion about the game.

There are also some pitfalls from doing research as an insider. *Magic* has been an influential part of my life, and it is difficult to be highly critically of something you are so close to. Yet, since it is impossible to achieve pure objectivity, I feel that the familiarity of someone with experience and understanding of the subculture far outweighs the merits of studying, learning, and summarizing an entire subculture within a short time frame. This also prevents the academic shortcoming that sometimes plagues research on fandom: a scholar from outside the cultural phenomenon comes in to tell the fans and participants the cultural meaning behind what they are doing and why it is important. I can speak as a knowledgeable participant and as a scholar.

There were potential pitfalls because I was so close to the game, against which I took preventative measures. One way to combat any personal bias was to include other players’ voices. Through surveys I was able to collect twenty-nine different players’ opinions about *Magic*, which provide others’ perspectives to my argument. This would help prevent generalizing the experience of the entire community just from my own personal experience. I was also aware of the lexicon that is part of the *Magic* community that might not be obvious to readers who are not familiar with the game. I have tried to use terminology that does not require
in-depth cultural capital about *Magic* to understand. I have the player knowledge and understanding of the game, along with a long enough history to understand how the game works culturally. I also have a scholar’s cultural studies background. My approach is to mesh a deep understanding of the cultural phenomenon that is *Magic* with the critical and academic analysis of cultural studies. This includes examining the community of *Magic* players as part of an urban leisure subculture of trading card games, examining the role of the company that owns *Magic: the Gathering* in fostering the community, and examining how this contributes to the financial success of the game.

The previous academic work on *Magic: the Gathering* consists of a relative tiny body of work that is varied in approach. Csilla Weninger, in her article “Social Events and Roles in *Magic*: A Semiotic Analysis,” examined *Magic* as a semiotic tool for play interaction.\(^7\) Weninger’s research focused primarily on frames of interaction and knowledge that are expressed and experienced during game play. Yet, her research was limited to semiotically breaking down video recordings of her and her husband playing a few games of *Magic*. Weninger admits her shallow understanding of *Magic* and how that is an important aspect of the signification derived from her analysis of the game play. While her research is interesting, it is limited because it is a very close reading of only two players’ interactions and her interpretations of how those interactions can be read as cultural signs. Her research also dates from the very early beginnings of the game, roughly fifteen years ago.

J. Patrick Williams explores the game through a consumption lens, researching *Magic* and the miniatures game *Mage Knight* as examples of the hobby’s consumption tendencies.\(^8\) Williams’ article focuses on how problematic the notion of authentic identity can be in subcultures focused on conspicuous consumption. He finds that the commercial element of
hobby gaming is one of the driving forces behind its success but muddles the distinction between who is and is not an authentic member of the group. Since cards and other game elements are purchasable, in theory anyone has access to the subculture, but in actuality there are economic barriers for some who wish to participate. Overall Williams explores how money and consumption patterns relate to identity construction and feelings of connectedness to the community.

Patrick T. Kinkade and Micheal A. Katovich’s research involved immersion in the gaming community. This was undertaken from a sociological perspective toward the game and research. One of the authors (they chose to keep this information ambiguous in their article) learned to play *Magic* and attended tournaments at local cards shops with his son. This was the major crux of their research: personal experiences and interviews with other players. While their research is important, they approach it from an outsider perspective. Their research focuses on *Magic* as a way to create identity and how the identity is related to space. Their conclusion is that *Magic* players create identity through different means that are less anchored in space than were previous subcultures.

Jonathan Arlt, in his Master’s thesis, “Exploring the Social World of Magic: the Gathering,” takes a sociological look at *Magic*. Arlt’s research focused on *Magic* as a means to generate social capital and how this capital relates to hobby gaming. Arlt bases his research on his personal experiences as well as interviews he conducted at a local card shop in a sociological study focusing on a small group. While Arlt’s research does a tremendous job of exploring some of the intimate social aspects generated from being involved in the *Magic* community, he does not tie his research to any larger cultural trends. His thesis is an exploration of people’s personal experiences with the game and how *Magic* is an influential socializing text. Arlt writes:
Over the course of this research I have come to the realization that for many hobby gamers—myself included—this is what really matters. Ultimately, we don’t really care about hobby gaming’s cultural visibility or the extent to which hobby gaming fan culture is ignored in academia. We don’t really care what the religious alarmists and the conservative pundits have to say about the subversive nature of Dungeons and Dragons, and we aren’t bothered by the derision of those who don’t understand our love of fantasy gaming. In the end what really matters is laughing, drinking and playing cards with friends until the wee hours of the morning.  

In some ways our research is similar, discussing the community built around a trading card game. But my research builds on the idea that people’s experiences with cultural texts are important, examining how Wizards of the Coast fostered the creation of an imagined international community of Magic players that extends beyond small local groups. I emphasize that the larger cultural implications about branding and community building are key to Magic’s success, which is one of the reasons why the game resonates so well with players. The major growth of the Magic brand and community started shortly after Arlt’s thesis was finished, which might be one reason for his lack of emphasis.

While not an academic book, Jonny Magic and the Card Shark Kids by David Kushner is part biography of Jon Finkel, one of the best professional Magic players, and part exposition on Magic’s cultural impact. Kushner, adjunct Journalism professor at New York University, spent a few years traveling and interviewing professional Magic players as research for his book. Kushner focused on the life of Jon Finkel, describing how this nerdy young boy found himself through Magic and fostered skills that he eventually used to become a professional poker and blackjack player, as well as a hedge fund manager. Kushner explores Magic as a cultural
phenomenon, citing how it created a cultural space for kids like Finkel to feel a sense of belonging, as well as a training ground for the future intellectuals of the world.

Magic: The Gathering is a card game that has quietly spawned an international phenomenon and multibillion-dollar industry. Brought to market in 1993 for under $100,000, it outsells Monopoly and Scrabble combined. It is overlooked, misunderstood, and for, some of the smartest young people on the planet, profoundly influential. Those who seek insight into the future of Wall Street traders, research scientists, poker stars, technologists, and boot-strapped entrepreneurs would be served to sit down at a neighborhood Magic game.\textsuperscript{13}

Kushner’s research focuses on the late 1990s and early 2000s, providing detailed personal anecdotes from some of the top players at the time. This book provides a powerful insight into the early beginnings of Magic’s growth in popularity and success, as well as the social ramifications of the game.

I also utilized works that focus on similar gaming pursuits. Gary Alan Fine’s \textit{Shared Fantasy} was one of the first academic looks into the subculture of Fantasy Role Playing Games.\textsuperscript{14} His groundbreaking research established a scholarly basis for the study of hobby games. Fine’s research provided many parallels to Magic and offered a framing device to study the game as part of an urban leisure subculture. Some of Fine’s additional works on games and infrastructure were also important influences on my work in this thesis.

Although the amount of academic writing on Magic has been relatively small, there is a large body of work written about the game from a nonacademic position. Hundreds and hundreds of articles have been written about the game: from strategy guides, to tournament reports, to trading advice, to tournament prep, to player etiquette, and beyond. This also includes daily
articles published by Wizards of the Coast on the official corporate *Magic* website. The majority of this information is very time sensitive, pertaining to tournaments within a few months’ timeframe, trading advice for the relatively immediate future, and current issues within the game. This work is mostly written by players about some aspect of the game, but this means that there is a large body of work written about *Magic* for *Magic* players. My discussion of *Magic* draws on these articles created by the community and the company, as well as industry reports about the game, my own experiences as a player, and online interviews I conducted with other players.

Overall, the goal of my research is to combine all these different sources in my analysis to understand the symbiotic relationship between the corporation and the players in the growth of the *Magic* community over the last few years. The argument of my thesis is multi-pronged. First, I will prove that *Magic* is representative of a larger cultural trend within the trading card game subculture that, despite its continuous growth, tends to be overlooked by academia. Second, I will discuss how a blending of official infrastructure and fan practice helps creates a vibrant and strong community. Lastly, I will discuss how *Magic*’s community has been instrumental and influential in many players’ lives and explore the cultural implications of the trading card game subculture ushered in by *Magic*.

In Chapter One I discuss what kind of game *Magic* is, how it was created and how it spawned an entire gaming subculture. I describe the basic principles of the game to help those readers who have limited knowledge about the game better understand the implications and importance of my research. Next I cover the different types of people who play *Magic*, as well as the different rewards they get out of the game. This is also aided by looking at how the company views its consumers and how it adjusts for those players. I argue that *Magic* is part of an urban leisure subculture through a comparison of *Magic* and the trading card game subculture to the
work Gary Alan Fine pioneered on the fantasy role playing subculture. Lastly, I discuss the
financial implications of Magic and the power of the secondary market within the trading card
game subculture.

Chapter Two is an examination of the concept of community and its application to
Magic. I argue that community is at the core of the Magic brand and its success. I discuss some
of the academic work that has been written on Magic and how that relates to community. I then
break down actual practices within the community, like metagaming, as examples to support the
conceptualization of community. I discuss how different levels of engagement with the game and
community influence players and participation. Finally, I examine who is part of the Magic
demographic and who is a typical player.

Chapter Three is a discussion of the tension between the official and unofficial
community building within Magic. This is an exploration of the concept of copyrighted
subcultures and the importance of an official structure to facilitate and foster community. I
explore the official Magic tournament structure and how this can be analogous to other activities
like sports in promoting engagement. I argue that Magic is not just a cultural product for the
United States, but is consciously created and promoted as a global product through tournaments
and other practices. I then discuss some other trading cards games and how they relate to and are
different from Magic. Overall Magic has been more consistent and successful, which
demonstrates the importance of a strong infrastructure to a community. I discuss how this then
has helped create the overall subculture based around card games, which has provided a positive
outlet that was previously unavailable to people. Finally, I argue that unofficial community
practices that were incorporated and made official overall reinforced the community.
In the final chapter, I discuss the information that I collected through questionnaires during the latter part of 2011. I look at the similarities among the twenty-nine digital responses I received, including information about how long the respondents have been involved with the game, where they play and with whom. There is also a qualitative discussion based on personal accounts that respondents shared. This includes how Magic has influenced people’s lives, how important the community is to the overall game, and whether the players or the company is the most important.

NOTES

7 Weninger, “Social Events and Roles in Magic,” 57-76.
8 Williams, “Consumption and Authenticity,” 77-98.
13 Kushner, Jonny Magic and the Card Shark Kids, XIII.
14 Gary Alan Fine, Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983).
CHAPTER I. MAGIC AND THE CREATION OF A SUBCULTURE

The question that needs to be addressed first is what exactly is *Magic: the Gathering*? *Magic* is a trading/collectable/strategic card game that was the first of its kind. *Magic* in its inception was a simpler game, but after almost two decades of development and innovation, the game today exists in many forms. *Magic*, at its core, is a game concerned with, and created by, cards. Similar to other games where cards or pieces have specific rules attached (for example, that the knight in chess can only move in an L shape or the ace in blackjack has the value of either 1 or 11), each *Magic* card carries its own rules text. This can range from very simple to very complex. This is one of the defining points of the game and is what makes it so dynamic. Each card in some way alters the rules, pushes on the system for change. Where most traditional games involve static rule sets, *Magic* is constantly changing with new sets and rulings. This constant change allows *Magic* to remain fresh and promotes not only continuous play, but also continuous consumption.

It is important to have some concept of how the game is played to better understand the game’s significance. To play a game of *Magic* a player needs his/her own deck (also known as a library) of cards to play with. A player chooses which cards to combine together to make his/her own deck, unlike games like poker or blackjack where players share a communal deck. *Magic* uses its own type of cards and can only be played with *Magic* cards. Traditionally deck building is accomplished two ways. One way is that a player constructs a deck out of cards s/he already owns, usually with some restrictions on what types of cards can be used (this is known as Constructed). The other way is for players to open a certain amount of *Magic* product and build a deck out of only those cards (this is known as Limited).
*Magic* traditional is played by one player versus another player, like chess. Other variations can also be played with multiple players. In theory the game could be played with a hundred players, but the logistics make it difficult. There are also other variations of the game with modified rules and restrictions. Each player starts the game with 20 life points. These life points are a resource, and when a player runs out, s/he loses the game. There are a few different ways for a player to win a game of *Magic*, but the two most common are when the opponent’s life total is zero or less or when the opponent has to draw a card from his/her deck but cannot (due to no cards being left in the deck). To achieve one of these paths to victory, a player has to use different types of cards. Lands are a type of card used to produce mana, which is basically used for resource management, as money is used in *Monopoly*.

Mana is used to pay the costs for other types of cards, like creatures, artifacts, and spells. There are five different types or colors of mana (White, Blue, Black, Red and Green), which complicates and restricts what type of cards can be played and when. Creatures, the most common type of card, are used to attack (which can reduce life points) or block (help prevent the loss of life points). Most cards have additional rules texts or abilities written on them that in some way alter the rules of the game.¹ Using combinations of various cards and resource management, a player not only tries to beat his/her opponent, but also tries to hinder his/her opponent from beating the player in the meantime. It is this diversity in options for how to build a deck of cards and play the game that helps make *Magic* the unique game that it is. This also allows for almost endless customizability of the game.

The logistics of the game allows *Magic* to be played almost anywhere. People play *Magic* on kitchen tables or while sitting on the floor. People play *Magic* in large convention centers, hotel ballrooms, hotel rooms, and card shops around the world. People play *Magic* in tournaments
and even for just for fun. *Magic* is played anywhere from the United States to Brazil to Germany to Japan to China to the Czech Republic to everywhere else in between. There have even been stories of professional *Magic* players getting in a few midflight games while on the airplane traveling to and from events. A few *Magic* players are known for renting a beachhouse from Elizabeth Taylor for about two weeks prior to Pro Tour Honolulu to party and game.² American soliders have even been known to play *Magic* during some downtime while in Iraq.³

*Magic* even has an electronic side with *Magic Online*, a digital version of the cardboard game. *Magic Online* is supposed to act as a complete digital version of *Magic*. This means that players can buy digital packs that have the same contents as physical packs. Card prices for digital cards are similar to their paper counterparts. One of the biggest appeals of *Magic Online* is the ability for the program to give players access to play *Magic*, whether it be tournaments, trading, or casual games, at any hour of the day. This also allows players to interact and play with players from across the world that they would be unable to play *Magic* with in paper form.

*Magic* was created by Richard Garfield in the early 1990s when he was getting his PhD in combinatorics from the University of Pennsylvania.⁴ *Magic* was not the original idea Garfield had when he pitched potential game ideas to the fledgling company Wizards of the Coast. His first game, *RoboRally*, was a board game that Garfield was hoping Wizards of the Coast, Wizards or WotC for short, would print and publish. Wizards, as a company, had only been around for little more than a year and was hesitant about its available resources to print a board game like *RoboRally*. The company declined Garfield’s pitch for *RoboRally*, but asked if he had any other ideas. Garfield pitched an idea that was the early inspiration for *Magic*.⁵

*Magic: the Gathering* was created out of a desire to make a game that was quick to play, was easy to play at conventions or places with limited space, utilized fantasy art and was able to
fit Wizards’ budget. These desires created a demand for *Magic* to be a fast-paced game that required less setup than other games, with the novelty of the ability to be played during the downtime/waiting in other games. Garfield also liked creating variations of existing games like chess and was inspired by the idea of what would happen if you had a game where each piece slightly altered the overall game play experience.\(^6\) Garfield was also familiar with games like poker and the game’s ability to engage player participation. With these ideas in mind, Garfield developed what would become *Magic* with his friends and colleagues while finishing up his doctoral degree.

Once the game was refined, Garfield and Wizards previewed the very first *Magic* set, Alpha, at Origins 1993. Origins is a gaming convention, and there *Magic* had a relatively strong preview, but it was nothing compared to its official release later that summer at Gencon. Gencon is one of the largest gaming conventions in the world and usually where new games are first revealed to the public. *Magic* was a huge success in 1993, completely selling out of the 2.6 million cards worth of Alpha product that were available at the time. Due to *Magic*’s high demand, the following set, Beta (a rerelease of all the cards from Alpha with a few new inclusions), was released to try to meet demand. The 7.3 million cards in the Beta set were completely sold out before the end of 1993, prompting Wizards to release the next set, Unlimited (which was identical to Beta except it had a white border instead of black).\(^7\) Wizards had sold over 10 million cards in less than six months. *Magic*’s initial popularity and demand completely caught Garfield and Wizards off guard, but they quickly learned they had created something that was new, popular, and profitable.

Part of *Magic*’s appeal was that it combined the collectable aspect of sports cards (which had been popular for over two decades by that point), the fantasy elements of games like
Dungeons and Dragons, and the competitive elements of war and board games, along with poker. Magic cards, just like sports cards, are sold in randomly assorted cards packs stuffed into opaque plastic wrappers. This means that the contents of each pack of cards are mostly unknown, which is one of the reasons behind Magic’s success. Players buy up large numbers of packs in hopes of getting or “opening” a desired card. Cards are also printed with different rarities, which influences how many copies of the card are printed and how often the card appears in a pack. As of 2012, Magic cards are printed in four different rarities: common, uncommon, rare and mythic rare. The idea of selling randomly assorted packs has become one of the defining aspects of collectable and trading cards games and is a big factor behind their economic success. This not only encourages people to buy more packs of cards, but also to trade cards with other people to try to obtain desired cards. This also helped create extrinsic value in the cards. Just like with sports cards, certain cards are rarer and have a higher demand, which causes some cards to be worth more money than others.

Magic’s early success made Wizards of the Coast the company it is today. In 1999 Wizards of the Coast was bought by Hasbro Inc. and has been under this ownership ever since, putting Magic under the same ownership as other cultural gaming giants like Monopoly and Scrabble. Magic also helped pave the way for the large cultural children’s card game phenomenon that would follow in its footsteps, including Pokémon and Yu-Gi-Oh. Magic today is printed in eleven different languages (English, German, French, Spanish, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Italian, Portuguese, Chinese Traditional and Chinese Simplified), sold globally, and played by over twelve million players worldwide. It has a Pro Tour circuit that gives out over two million dollars a year in money and prizes, and is played both physically and online.
I argue that *Magic*, as a game, can be viewed on two polar extremes. In one capacity, *Magic* is an imaginary battle between wizards fighting one another with magical spells and fantastical monsters until one wizard remains standing. This concept is shown through the cards’ art, which all reflect fantasy landscapes and motifs like spells, angels, zombies, dragons, etc. It is also reflected through the card names, like Lightning Bolt, Unsummon, and Tarmogoyf. Lastly, the names of certain game zones like the battlefield, the graveyard, etc. lend to the fantasy feel along with card types like sorcery, creature, and enchantment.

In another capacity *Magic* is a multi-facet game of number crunching and strategy where players’ only concern is besting any competition. This is an emphasis not on what individual cards reflect (e.g. do these fantasy elements mesh well together or reflect some overall narrative) but on what cards are considered “better” based solely on merits and how those merits translate into winning. This is mostly reflected in the tournament sector of the game, where the fantasy elements almost completely disappear and it becomes a game of skill and math. This concept of the game is especially notable in the Pro Tour circuit and other tournaments with monetary incentives.

I find that the majority of players fall somewhere between these extremes. That *Magic* can be viewed and consumed in different ways has been made very apparent by Wizards. Members of Wizards of the Coast’s Research and Development department have discussed different types of players that they perceive as part of *Magic*’s consumer base. This Research and Development group is responsible for making new *Magic* cards and products and has done so over the last fifteen years. These designers of the game have made it known that they have certain names for different types of players and keep these concepts in mind when designing new cards and products. These names, Timmy, Johnny, Spike, and Vorthos, have evolved over time.
Mark Rosewater, one of the senior and most visible members of *Magic’s* R&D department, has written various articles about these personalities and how they influence the game’s production and construction. According to Rosewater, Timmy was not the first profile that was conceived, but was the first one to be named. The concept of a Timmy player, according to Rosewater, is:

Timmy is what we in R&D call the "power gamer." Timmy likes to win big. He doesn’t want to eke out a last minute victory. Timmy wants to smash his opponents. He likes his cards to be impressive, and he enjoys playing big creatures and big spells. One of the misconceptions is that Timmy has to be young. While it’s true that younger players are more apt to fall into this category, players of any age can be a Timmy. What sets Timmy apart from the other two profiles is that Timmy is motivated by fun. He plays Magic because it’s enjoyable. Timmy is very social. An important part of the game is sitting around with his friends.11

This type of player is seen as one who plays the game for fun and social aspects, while at the same time playing a game that is also exciting. Johnny, another profile, is less concerned with social expression and more with personal expression.

Johnny is the creative gamer to whom *Magic* is a form of self-expression. Johnny likes to win, but he wants to win with style. It’s very important to Johnny that he win on his own terms. As such, it’s important to Johnny that he’s using his own deck. Playing *Magic* is an opportunity for Johnny to show off his creativity.12

One of the strengths of *Magic* is the ability for players to imbue much of themselves in their decks. When you play Monopoly you don't get emotionally attached to the board. But with *Magic*, your deck becomes an extension of yourself. When your deck wins, you
win. When your deck gets complimented, you get complimented. It is this principle that drives Johnnies.\textsuperscript{13}

The Johnny player concept is interesting because it is based on the idea of people using \textit{Magic} as a personal expression. Their deck can be a symbol of their intelligence or intuitiveness. The last quote exemplifies this point. One of the interesting aspects of card games of this ilk is that there is a personal element to the game. A deck, a deliberate assemblage of certain cards, can be an extension of a person. This point also allows \textit{Magic} to resonate with players, since they have this extension in which they are attached, more so than other games.

The last of these player types, Spike, was the last to be named but was the first type Wizards was aware of.

Spike is the competitive player. Spike plays to win. Spike enjoys winning. To accomplish this, Spike will play whatever the best deck is. Spike will copy decks off the Internet. Spike will borrow other players’ decks. To Spike, the thrill of \textit{Magic} is the adrenalin rush of competition. Spike enjoys the stimulation of outplaying the opponent and the glory of victory. Spike cares more about the quantity of wins than the quality. For example, Spike plays ten games and wins nine of them. If Spike feels he should have won the tenth, he walks away unhappy.\textsuperscript{14}

Spike is the name given to the extreme tournament style player, one who considers winning over everything else. Spike is the embodiment of the competitive extreme of the spectrum that I discussed earlier, while Timmy and Johnny fall more towards the middle or other end. Rosewater makes sure to point out that these are generalizations of players and that combinations can exist (e.g. Johnny/Spike or Timmy/Johnny style player), but these concepts have been important for making a game and product that resonates with those who consume it.
These three profiles are discussed as psychographic profiles important to Magic’s branding, and the people creating this game are very transparent about these identities. One last identity that is discussed is called Vorthos, who is considered separate from the other three. This is because Vorthos is not concerned with how the game is played, but with how a story is constructed and told through the cards and the aesthetic elements of the cards, like art, name and flavor text.

Vorthos is the guy who started collecting cards because he liked the art, then read some Magic novels, then saw his favorite characters appear on some cards and decided to learn to play. There are a lot of Vorthoses out there. Some collect cards, but might not even play. Some have a hoot getting artists to sign their cards. Some don't read flavor text 'til after they finish the novel in case it might spoil the ending. Vorthos understands that Magic can be fun even when you're not playing the game.15

The concept of Vorthos, at its maximum, is at the extreme end of the other side of the spectrum from Spike. While at opposite ends, it does not necessarily mean that these two ideas are always in opposition. While one of these types tends to be a dominant trait for many players, these concepts are not mutually exclusive. To reiterate, players’ experiences exist somewhere between these extremes.

One important concept that is raised by the conceptualization of Vorthos is the idea that Magic has appeal outside of game play interactions. This means that there are people who get enjoyment from Magic aside from playing the game. This could be aesthetic elements, like enjoying the artwork displayed on each card. This could be an enjoyment of the stories that are told through the cards or enjoying the published novels based on Magic storylines. Regardless of
what a Vorthos finds appealing about Magic, it provides insight that there is more to Magic than just a game.

Defining who is a Magic player is complicated. Is someone only a player if s/he plays at least once a week, once a month, once a year? Is it someone who understands the rules and is able to play the game? Is it someone who only plays in tournaments? Is it the players who do not play in tournaments? Should only people who own Magic cards be considered players? If so, how many cards does a person need to own? Is owning a single card enough, or does it need to be hundreds or thousands of cards?

There are issues with all these questions, but I ultimately define a Magic player as: a person with some capacity to play the game, who is still actively interested and/or participates in the Magic community and defines him/herself as a player. This definition avoids issues of whether the person actually owns any cards, and how many. There are players, professional and casual, who borrow cards from friends for tournaments or just for fun. Another issue with owning cards is that Magic in some capacity is still a collectable card game. Even though the playing aspect has largely eclipsed the collecting side, there are still people out there who collect the cards without any intention of playing or knowledge of how to play (this also includes some Vorthoses). While these collectors might be interesting, they do not fit with my definition unless they also know how to play and are involved with the Magic community. (The majority tend to have some connection.) Since this thesis is concerned with how people interact with and create community, it is those who are involved with the community that I find important. This definition is intended to include both the tournament veterans (Spikes) and those who only play on kitchen tables, those who have been playing only a short time and those who have played for years, as well as those deeply invested with the Magic brand (Vorthoses).
Transitioning from background information about the game, I want to discuss how I define *Magic* as a cultural phenomenon. Based on the work by Gary Alan Fine in his book *Shared Fantasy*, I define *Magic* as part of an urban leisure subculture of trading card game players. Fine focused on fantasy role playing (FRP) games and came up with a method to academically consider gaming and its subcultures. Fine’s model predates *Magic* and similar card games by almost a decade, but still works very well with this subculture. This is no surprise since during *Magic*’s infancy it was considered a mere extension of *Dungeons and Dragons* and other FRP games, placing the genesis of trading card games within concepts of FRP games. Due to the closeness of the fantasy role playing game subculture Fine studied and the subculture of trading card games, most aspects of the trading card subculture fit within Fine’s theoretical umbrella. Yet it is not a perfect fit because *Magic* and other card games have outgrown many of the early analogies to FRP games and become a cultural phenomenon of their own. The industry can be described in different ways, as trading, collecting, or strategic card games, with these names overlapping. I will be referring to it as trading card games (TCG), but all three names are applicable.

Breaking down the urban leisure subculture definition, arguably the most important part is leisure. Games by definition are a form of leisure and fun. This fits with many other forms of popular culture like television, film, music, books, etc. Games are designed to be consumed and experienced during free time for enjoyment. This is something that people do voluntarily, and they actively choose to engage in, purchase and participate with the game. This is a group of individuals with a common interest but it is different from a group based on a common occupation or religious affiliation. Through *Magic*’s expansive growth, a few people have been able to turn it from leisure to work, but they are by far the minority (mainly professional players
and shop owners). For the vast majority of players, *Magic* is a game that takes up weekends, lunch breaks, and Friday nights. These players are part of a leisure subculture based on consumption of a commercial product created by the entertainment industry, similar in many ways to fans of sports teams, movies, television shows and other popular culture texts. Yet *Magic* players are active participants in their fandom, where to participate is to play and be active with the material. This fandom is different from many other forms of fandom because playing a game is a different form of engagement with a popular culture text than merely watching a film or athletic event. The fandom of an interactive game like *Magic* then is different from the usually more passive fandoms of sports, television or film. The traditional avid fan or fanatic is one who interacts with the text, which is inherent to *Magic*. There is an emphasis on self-identification as a *Magic* player, instead of someone who just enjoys playing *Magic*.16 This distinction highlights the idea of the hobby being an identifying defining point for a person, instead of something the person does.

Fine bases the other part of his definition of urban leisure subculture on the work of sociologists who considered how people expressed themselves and spent time in urban spaces which contain thousands of potential activities and scenes for people to occupy their time. Urban space has been considered a space connected with mass consumption. Many scholars have looked at various incarnations of this idea, from Dick Hebdige’s exploration of music and fashion17 to Henry Jenkins’ exploration of television fans and fandom.18 It is through these connections and choices of leisure pursuits that urban communities and subcultures are formed.

However, Fine also references some previous work he had done with his colleague Sherryl Kleinman. According to Fine and Kleinman “merely indicating common activities, culture, and segmental importance is not sufficient to show the existence of a subculture”.19
Three additional factors must be apparent with a leisure activity to constitute it as a subculture: “networks of communication through which common information is transmitted,” members who “identify themselves as a group and as sharing a subculture,” and being “identified as such by those outside the group, which increases the perception of common interests of the group members and increases solidarity.” Fine also explains how other elements like the size of the gaming society, economic significance of the gaming society, and a shared lexicon are also important.

Many of these elements laid out by Fine and Kleinman help support and provide rationale for examining trading card games as a subculture. One of first things that needs to be considered is the size of the subculture. Hasbro’s Chief Marketing Officer John Frascotti did an interview with Internal Correspondence version 2 (ICv2) that was published as an article on their website on November, 9th 2011. ICv2 is an informational website about pop culture products, including film, books, television and games, focusing on daily trade information, cultural trends, and product and sales information. This website focuses on tracking pop culture trends and reporting on industry numbers and growth, which provides valuable information in regards to Magic. In this interview Frascotti discusses the growth of the Magic brand since 2008: “[Magic’s] growth has come in two ways: the player base has grown by over 80% during that period, and per player spending has grown by 16%.” Frascotti states that Hasbro and Wizards of the Coast estimate about twelve million worldwide active players as of November 2011. Twelve million players is quite an impressive number, but only focuses on Magic and does not include all the other games that make up the rest of the subculture. Fine’s estimates about FRP games was only half of a million players and he considered that a substantial number. The trading card game subculture involves a significantly larger group of people by comparison.
Magic’s success spawned the creation of the trading/collectable card game market and subculture that exists today, with many games mirroring or adapting Magic’s model. Richard Garfield and Wizards hold the first patent on the idea of a trading/collectable card game. The patent recognizes that Magic was the first cultural product to combine the elements of trading cards with elements of other chance games. “At this present, there are no known games that use freely tradable game elements or components, such as trading cards, and further games that enable a player to form a unique combination of components that competes against the combinations of an opponent”.22

Just like Superman’s debut in Action Comics was the genesis of the comic book industry, Magic’s release in 1993 was the start of the trading card game industry.

Magic’s explosive sales growth changed the hobby market. In fact, sales of role-playing and miniatures combat games slumped as consumers shifted their purchases to Magic.


Not only was Magic initially very popular, it changed what hobby games were popular and spawned many other games. It also changed the style of game play, bringing back competitive elements that had been waning.

After Magic was introduced in 1993, the shops initially embraced it as another role-playing game. With its ghoulish pictures of monsters and spells, after all, it certainly looked the part. But as gamers quickly learned, Magic was a Trojan ogre; it carried something quite different inside. With its head-to-head competition, fast play, and
strategic action, the game wasn’t about touchy-feely things like building one’s character, working as a team, and going on quests. The object was to whittle down an opponent’s score from 20 to 0. It was about destruction and victory. It was about sport.\textsuperscript{24}

In spite of \textit{Magic}’s success, the TCG industry did not really take off until the release of the \textit{Pokémon TCG} in the late 1990s, which was the industry’s first break into mainstream culture.\textsuperscript{25} Since then, the TCG subculture can be broken down roughly into two different target audiences: younger kids (fifteen and younger) and adults (16 and up).\textsuperscript{26} There is a wide swath of options of games, with different target audiences, that make up the trading card game subgenre. This helps foster the large size of the subculture, reinforcing its significance in regards to Fine and Kleinman’s criteria.\textsuperscript{27}

Another aspect that is important to consider about trading card games as a subculture is the economic significance of the games, which is twofold: the amount of money games make through retail sales and the amount of money the games generate via the secondary market. For \textit{Magic}, new cards are sold in sealed packs whose price is set by a Manufacturer’s Suggested Retail Price (MSRP) determined by the producer of the cards, Wizards of the Coast. The MSRP is a way for the company to regulate and control initial prices of card packs based on how much Wizards feels new, unopened \textit{Magic} product should be sold for. The suggested price for a single pack of \textit{Magic} cards has risen over the years, with a current price of $3.99. Once a \textit{Magic} set goes out of print, the pack prices tend to exceed the MSRP, which mostly pertains to newer cards and sets when they are released. This primary market is made of up of the product stores receive from Wizards and sell at the MSRP value.

Outside of the initial sales of the cards, \textit{Magic} is a behemoth in the gaming secondary market. The secondary market is the market where individual cards are resold, traded, and
exchanged by third party companies and players. This practice includes card dealers at conventions and tournaments where cards are sold individually, brick and mortar card shops, major online card stores like Channelfireball.com, Starcitygames.com, Strikezoneonline.com, and even smaller online stores like Cardsnstuff.com. This also includes resale sites like eBay and Craigslist, which have provided popular and effective ways for selling and exchanging cards. Even the act of trading cards with friends, at tournaments/conventions, or online is influenced by and perpetuates this secondary market. Prices are not regulated by Wizards through corporate practices like MSRP, but instead by supply and demand restrictions. This is largely influenced by how rare a card is (supply) and how often the card is played in tournaments (demand). In a study on trading card games, it was found in 2008 that Magic holds 57.2% of the volume shared in the secondary market for trading card games. Magic makes up more than half of the secondary market for card games, which means Magic sells more through these channels than all other card games combined.

Since Wizards does not sell cards individually, Wizards and Hasbro do not directly engage within the secondary market, but they are conscious of it and have committed business practices in the past to help protect and support this market. For example, in the summer of 1995 Wizards released the Chronicles set, which was a complete reprinting of previous Magic cards, including some rarer, harder to find cards. These reprintings completely ruined the value of many of these cards, causing a sizable backlash from the community. To help quell the backlash from upset players, Wizards initiated a policy called the Reserve List. This was a list of certain cards that Wizards promised never to reprint again, therefore protecting the card’s rarity and perceived value. This was an acknowledgement that supply and demand, by both collectors and players, was a huge driving force behind Magic’s success. There were a few loopholes in the Reserve
List which Wizards would from time to time exploit. This created minor rumblings from the community but nothing like the backlash prior to the Reserve List. The Reserve List protected the value of a group of cards, which led to large price spikes over the years and resulted in some outcry to do away with the list to reduce some of the cost to players of owning certain cards. In March 2010, in response to requests from many players to get rid of the Reserve List, Wizards did the exact opposite. They tightened the restrictions within the list, removing any loopholes they previously had, and renewed their dedication to preserving the scarcity of certain cards. 29

This policy is one of the causes for Magic’s lucrative secondary market. It is no surprise that players are concerned about the prices of the cards when there are multiple cards that can easily fetch over fifty dollars apiece, with others hitting prices around $100, $300, and even upwards of $2,000 apiece.

A prime example of the price market that is possible within Magic is the card Tarmogoyf. Tarmogoyf is one of 180 cards released in the set Future Sight during the spring of 2007. Tarmogoyf is a rare card from the set, which means that a person has a one in sixty chance of opening one in a pack (there are a total of sixty rares in the set). The card started off being worth around three dollars, but that did not last for very long. Since then, Tarmogoyf has gone through price cycles, peaking at a hundred dollars apiece and dropping down to around fifty dollars over a five year period. 30 Foil, premium versions of Tarmogoyf, which are rarer than the normal versions, sell for around three hundred dollars apiece. 31 One of the reasons for this card’s price cycle was its tournament applications. Tarmogoyf ended up being a card that was desirable across different tournament formats, which created a heavy demand. The card was also printed in a smaller sized set, which also was a factor in how many exist.
Tarmogoyf is an interesting example because it is not covered by Wizards’ Reserve List, so at any point the card could be reprinted, which would cause a large drop in its overall price due to the large increase in supply. Despite all of this, Tarmogoyf’s price has been on a general incline over the years. Tarmogoyf in some ways is an extreme example because it is one of the first Magic cards to have ever seen such a huge price spike over a short period of time. Yet, because Tarmogoyf proved that there is a strong segment of Magic’s community that is willing to pay top dollar for cards, many cards have followed in its footsteps, having similar tremendous spikes in price. Other cards, like a Beta Black Lotus from Magic’s early beginnings, have a price tag around three thousand dollars apiece. Even newer cards, like Sorin, Lord of Innistrad from the set Dark Accession (which was released February 3rd 2012) was listed at the presale price of $59.99 apiece.32

There have been a few ICv2 reports and interviews with Hasbro’s CEO praising the importance of Magic to Hasbro’s quarterly profit reports. An April 2010 report states:

In a conference call with industry analysts Hasbro CEO Brian Goldner singled out Wizards of the Coast for special mention: ‘One more thing that I should mention as I look at the array of games that are selling well, I think that the Wizards of the Coast folks certainly deserve a shout out for their effort, and really Magic the Gathering is performing very well both as the analog paper-based game as well as online.’33

On April 4th, 2011, a new ICv2 column stated:

Hasbro reported that its Games and Puzzles sales declined 12% in Q1 to $200.4 million. Magic: The Gathering was an exception; the company reported that sales on the pre-eminent CCG line produced by Hasbro division Wizards of the Coast
were actually up in Q1. *Magic* sales have been on a tear since 2009, and it’s impressive that WotC is still able to drive year over year sales increases. . . The company had a generally lackluster quarter, with sales flat and profits down 71%.  

On February 8th, 2012, it was reported:

Hasbro CEO Brian Goldner told analysts in the company’s conference call this week that *Magic: The Gathering* is “…the largest game brand in the U.S.” (apparently excluding videogames from the comparison). And for the first time, a Hasbro exec has characterized the size of the brand, implying that it’s $200 million or more. In praising the Wizards of the Coast management team Goldner noted that the team had taken *Magic*, “which totaled less than $100 million in revenues in 2008 and was on the decline, to where it is today,… more than double the size it was just three years ago.”

And finally, on April 24th, 2012, ICv2 reported:

Hasbro missed expectations for both sales and earnings for Q1, but *Magic: The Gathering* grew rapidly, according to the company's earnings release and conference call on Monday. . . ‘*Magic: The Gathering* is performing exceedingly well, up probably nearly 40% in the quarter,’ Hasbro CEO Brian Goldner said in the conference call. 

So while some of Hasbro’s brands have been through major fluctuations, like *Transformers* being only profitable during the years when one of the movies is released, *Magic* has been a strong selling brand since 2008. It is impressive that *Magic* has been such a strong commodity for Hasbro, which owns other large cultural products like *Monopoly*, *Transformers*, and *Scrabble*. *Magic* has not only been one of the few brands within Hasbro to remain consistent, but has actually increased in profitability over the last four years. Through this growing of the
brand, which results from staunch community building by Wizards, (discussed in Chapter Three) *Magic* has become worth multimillions of dollars and shows no signs of stopping.

_Magic*, as a game, is worth lots of money, which has created economic barriers to playing certain cards, strategies, or formats. This fact has not gone without critique,\(^38\) but is reflective of the trading card game subculture overall, not just *Magic*. There also exists a worldwide Pro Tour circuit sponsored by Wizards that gives out over two million dollars a year in money and prizes,\(^39\) and secondary market stores like Star City Games\(^40\) or TCG Player\(^41\) have been running their own cash tournaments over the last few years. There is even a *Magic* Hall of Fame that recognizes the very best players over the history of the game and usually inducts around three new members a year.\(^42\) This is also the reason for DCI, the organization that is in charge of certifying judges for *Magic* tournaments, banning or restricting cards, and even sanctioning or banning players from tournaments.

The DCI, formally known as the Duelist Convention International, is an organization controlled by Wizards of the Coast that regulates tournament *Magic*. The DCI is in charge of certifying judges for tournaments, so that rules questions and disputes can be resolved. The DCI is also in charge of recording and ranking player’s statuses, creating a system that ranks all the players in the world. This ranking can be narrowed down to country, state, and even region which allows players to know how their tournament progress ranks up with other players in their region as well as around the world. These rankings even serve as invites to tournaments like the Pro Tour, which allows players to compete based on their records. Players also can be reprimanded by the DCI for rules violations like cheating, bribery, and coercion. The levels of punishments vary based on the transgression and the player (repeated acts and history are taken into consideration) and can range from a simple warning, to a game loss, to being disqualified.
from the event, to being suspended from the game for a length of time, to even being permanently banned from playing in *Magic* events.

Another defining aspect of urban leisure subcultures for Fine and Kleinman is having its own lexicon. *Magic* is filled with so much jargon that Wizards felt it necessary to release an article explaining some of the more common word usages. Some of these terms generate from shorthand versions of card names that become representative of the card’s function overall. For example, you could say you “bolted” a creature. This refers to the card Lightning Bolt, which lets the caster do three damage to any target. So “bolting” a creature implies that you cast a Lightning Bolt on it, but sometimes the phrase is used even more generally to mean casting any form of direct damage spell (which Lightning Bolt is). Cards and decks also tend to have nicknames, which makes it difficult for an outsider to understand what it being discussed. For example, in the late 1990’s naming competitive *Magic* decks after breakfast foods was a popular phenomenon. Decks with names like Pebbles, Fruity Pebbles, Trix and Full English Breakfast were very popular at times, but gave no insight to the deck without insider understanding. For cards, nicknames vary from deviations of the card name (Tarmogoyf=Goyf) or small leaps in association (Mother of Runes=Mom), to the abstract (Morphling=Superman) and if the card was made by a professional player, the card sometimes will be known by the player’s name (Dark Confidant=Bob). The examples I used are ones that are fairly ubiquitous throughout the *Magic* community, but smaller scale groups of players also have their own lingo.

It is this intersection of lexicon, the number of players, the money and the time involved with the game that makes *Magic* part of a powerful urban leisure subculture of trading card games. Yet, the subculture has seen many different card games start up and later disappear. There is something significant about *Magic*: not only did it create the subculture, but it has been
consistently one of the most successful and popular card games over the last nineteen years. I argue that the community of players has had a huge impact on *Magic’s* success. In the following chapter, I explore how this community has been an integral part of the game’s popularity and success.

NOTES

1 One of the biggest examples of this is creature cards. An untapped creature can normally block an attack creature. Then there are variations like some creature that have an ability called Flying, in which that creature can only be blocked by creatures that also have Flying or another ability called Reach. This allows a creature to get by those who do not have certain abilities. Magic has multiple different examples of this concept and it is one of the ways that the game is able to put out so many new cards. This also adds to the strategy and variance in game play.


5 Adkison, “In The Beginning”.


7 Wizards of the Coast, “Alpha, Beta, and Unlimited Editions”.

8 Since the fall of 2008, with the release of Shard of Alara, a booster pack of *Magic* cards comes with 10 commons, 3 uncommons, 1 basic land, 1 token or advertisement, and 1 rare or 1 mythic rare. The chance of getting a mythic rare is about 1 out of every 8 packs. There is also the chance of getting a premium (aka foil) version of a card, which is a card that has gone through a foiling process that makes it reflective and gives it a glossy finish. The odds of getting a foil card are about 1 in every 70 cards. MSRP of a single pack is $3.99.

9 This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.


12 Rosewater, “Timmy, Johnny, and Spike.”


14 Rosewater, “Timmy, Johnny, and Spike.”


Magic: the Gathering, Pokémon TCG, Yu-Gi-Oh, Bella Sera, Duel Masters, Ascension, World of Warcraft TCG, Naruto TCG, Legend of the Five Rings, etc.


This number is a combination of recent eBay sales and other online retail store prices for Foil Tarmogoyf.

This price was recorded on Starcitygames.com on Saturday, January 28th, 2012 at 3:44 PM.


CHAPTER II. COMMUNITY MAGIC

The first chapter of this thesis provided some insight into Magic: the Gathering as a game and its cultural significance. In this chapter I examine Magic players in relation to community, and how this is different from a subculture. First, subcultures have their own style and lexicon, and tend to be distinct from the dominant culture.¹ It has been established that Magic is part of a subculture, but how is that different from a Magic community? First, the card gaming subculture includes many other trading card games, whereas the community focuses specifically on Magic. This means that Magic’s community is located within the urban leisure subculture of trading card games. This allows for overlap between the community and the subculture and for players to migrate from different games and communities while still staying within the gaming subculture. Communities tend to form around subcultures, especially subcultures with strong fan bases, which is true for Magic. Yet the fact that Magic is part of an urban leisure subculture does not necessarily prove that a Magic community exists. There are many articles written about Magic, commentary from Wizards of the Coast, and even advertisements that mention a Magic community, but is that enough to declare that a community exists? What constitutes a community?

The definition of community is heavily contested in academia, with scholars rarely agreeing upon a single answer. Community, as a concept, has even lost some of its academic weight in the various disagreements and debates over its meaning. In 1955 George A. Hillery came up with ninety-four different definitions of community spread across different disciplines, as well as quantitative and qualitative research.² The discussion continued long after Hillery’s work, with scholars opting to use different words in an attempt to alleviate this concern. Hillery emphasizes the importance of finding a definition that is true to the subject being studied but is
also understandable to the reader, instead of spending too much time chasing after definitions. According to Hillery, “[i]f the reader can accept the assumption that the folk village is a type of community, then he possesses a useful tool for distinguishing communal from non-communal forms. The significant question concerns the nature of social groups, not whether a ninety-fifth definition of community is possible.”

Despite the potential issues, I still use the term community for a few reasons. First, while the term community might have various definitions, I define how I use the term. This necessity to define community to reduce ambiguity would not be prevented by using a different word. Second, community is a word used by Wizards, as well as players who write about the game, to discuss and advertise Magic. This is a term that is already in the vernacular of the subculture. I used this term in my questionnaires because my respondents would be familiar with the concept and be able to answer accordingly. My usage of the term then allows for it to match up with and reflect the responses I collected, as well as with any other material written about the game. This also echoes Hillery’s work to find a word that the audience can recognize and understand on some level.

Yet, one concern with how the word “community” is used within the subculture is that Magic is assumed to have communities on various levels. Some examples of how “community” tends to be used include: a local card shop that has a recurring player base, a regional area where players meet through larger events like Pre-releases and PTQs, a state based community supported by events like Regionals, States, and other events, or a national level based around nation and cultural ties. These are different ways that Magic is thought and talked about in regards to community, but I focus on a more abstract, grand narrative idea of community that
encompasses the idea of the *Magic* community as a whole, including what is shared and experienced by all *Magic* players.

So, what is community then? I define community as an imagined concept of a collection of individuals, united by a shared interest and unrestricted by space and time, who ultimately act in reaction to the imagined idea. One of the major influences for this definition comes from Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined community. Anderson’s concept of imagined community was an attempt to move away from Marxist conceptualizations of society to consider ideas of nationalism and how citizens, many of whom share no direct interaction, participate in a shared concept of community. He argues that there is an imagined community, a conceptualization of ideology that brings together comradeship of people so strong that as a result people are willing to kill and/or die for the sake of this imagined national concept. In the end it is not whether or not the community is authentic that is important, but the ways it is perceived and conceptualized. Anderson argues that with any collective of people of any large significance, it is impossible to have constant, direct involvement, which results in some form of imagined conceptualization, due to the need to perceive those in the group with whom there is no interaction.4

While Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined community does not fit exactly because *Magic*’s community is not on the same level as a national consciousness, his concept of community still provides valuable insight. Also, the idea of imagined membership of community has become a main cultural theory since revolutions in technology (television, phone, and internet) that allow for interactions despite barriers of space and time. Victor Turner, in his research on ritual, also reiterates this idea, stating: “Community is the being no longer side by side (and, one might add, above and below) but with one another of a multitude of persons. And
this multitude, though it moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a
dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from I to Thou.” Community is about who you are
connected to through a shared interest. Gary Alan Fine also builds on this idea of imagining
membership when he wrote:

Community is no longer dependent upon geographical propinquity but assumes shared
interests, embedded in a society in which numerous leisure choices are available. Leisure
groups provide an effective means of establishing these personal, communal relations. . .
In leisure groups one can share one’s interests with like-minded others, producing a
community of acquaintances.6

For Fine community is not dependent on space, but around shared interest. Communities can be
built around leisure activities and common interests, which is a way of conceptualizing
communities based around popular cultural texts and practices. Community is also a multitude of
people, meaning that it is a significant collective.

Community is no longer restricted by spatial limitations, like those imagined by
Ferdinand Tönnies. Tönnies, one of the first sociological scholars, devised community
(Gemeinschaft) as a collective of individuals under a shared characteristic that was enacted
through individual effort. Communities were based on shared characteristics (blood, religion,
region, etc.), but were important because the collective nature of the community tended to
outweigh the needs of the individual.7 This concept resonates with the previous statement
expressed by Victor Turner; there is some characteristic about the community that transcends the
individual. The process of community moves individuals along collective ties and ideology,
transcending the self to the communal.
Magic’s community is an imagined community that exists based on perceptions of those within the community. While players can be broken down into smaller groups or pockets of involvement, their overall connectedness is tethered through this imagined sense of community. The structure of Magic forces people together by competing against one another in interactions of play. Magic is not designed to be played alone and encourages interaction. Through these interactions, as well as tournaments of various different scales, players interact and meet up with different people they would otherwise not have interacted with. This does not include the multitude of printed content about the game that is uploaded regularly on websites, weekly podcasts about the game, live tournament coverage or message boards where players discuss every aspect of the game. This large interaction and collection of online information fosters a sense of connectedness among players. Through these different texts and media, many of these players do not actively interact, but recognize this imagined sense of what it means to belong to Magic’s community. It allows people to perceive other players and perpetuate this concept through consumption of certain texts, for example a particular strategy article.

When considering the integral nature of community and Magic, it would be unwise to overlook the fact that the name of the game is Magic: the Gathering. Gathering is not only part of the name and the brand, but part of the core ideology of the game. As a noun, “gathering” means an assemblage of people; group or crowd. It reflects the communal nature of the game, people brought together through shared experiences. The name literally means bringing people together, forming connections, building community. As a verb it means to bring together or assemble from various places, sources, or people; collect gradually. So the game itself is a collecting, an assemblage of people being brought together through a collective tie. The game gathers active consumers and participants together through a sense of community.
Although this latter part of the name is usually dropped in an attempt to shorten the name (as I have done throughout), this does not mean that it lacks in significance. When trying to initially copyright the name, “magic” as a single word was found to be too broad to be uniquely copyrighted. The initial producers tried to come up with some alternative names, but none of them felt quite right. They decided to try to figure out a way to still use the word magic, but also be able to own the rights to the name. According to Mark Rosewater, “The name just seemed too perfect. They went back to the lawyer and asked what they could do to call it Magic. The lawyer told them they needed to add something else unique and ‘ownable’ onto it that allowing them to copyright the name as a whole. That is how ‘The Gathering’ was added.”

“The Gathering” was the important factor in allowing the original name to stick while forever becoming integral to the overall brand. Many different options were available instead of the word “gathering,” but any other word would not have the same resonance. The concept of bringing people together became part of the initial core of the brand and has helped Magic become the success that it is today.

How have other scholars discussed community in relation to games like Magic? Patrick Kinkade and Michael Katovich’s article, "Beyond Place: On Being a Regular in an Ethereal Culture," is an ethnographic study about Magic and its status within the gaming subculture. Kinkade and Katovich’s research is based on a sociological principle that cultural identification and subcultural expression is anchored to space, and time spent within that space. Using this idea, they argue that Magic represents a culture not reliant on specific spaces or other definable elements that have been used to discuss/define communities in the past, but an ethereal culture with different markers. They are defining Magic as part of a subculture that does not conform to conventional correlations between time and space, defined by spatial and temporal restrictions. 

“[T]he proposition that as any particular culture becomes more ethereal, authentic regular
identification (or at least announcing oneself as a regular and receiving validation by other regulars) becomes less anchored to measured time and literal space anchors and more grounded in particular accomplishments beyond measured and literal time and space markers.”

In some ways the authors are trying to wrestle with a question of authenticity: who is actually a *Magic* player and who is not, and how this identity is created and reinforced. To harken back to Anderson, “[c]ommunities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”

Kinkade and Katovich see *Magic* as a break from previous modes of authentication, where after enough time spent in a certain place, people would come to identify themselves as belonging to a subculture (which would then be either verified or rejected by the other members in that space). For these authors, a *Magic* player’s validation is in accomplishments, such as winning, play style, originality, and personality to name a few, rather than time and space.

J. Patrick Williams explains how difficult authenticity is to pin down with gaming subcultures that are reliant on conspicuous consumption as a form of identity construction. “If there is a direct correlation between consumption and identity, then we could expect to find this correlation to be highly salient within the organizations and expressions of collectable strategy game (CSG) subculture, a collection of leisure worlds grounded in the rational consumption and use of *collectable* game items.”

The idea is that if consumption practices are required as mode of authenticating persons, it becomes difficult because theoretically anyone with enough money has access to these markers, regardless of their connectedness to the community. This also excludes some members based solely on economic merits, which is also problematic.

Yet, games like *Magic* are heavily based on consumption practices. Williams goes on to explore how consumption patterns then influence concepts of player identity and feeling of
connectedness to the overall group. He points out that some of the basic tenets of collectable games push towards an idea of continuous consumption. Game producers constantly release new products\textsuperscript{21} that vary in game play usability and rarity. These new products tend to displace some of the previous game materials, usually being better in some aspect than the cards that came before. This displacement usually results from a demand to create newer and more interesting products for consumers in an effort to keep them playing and buying. These new products also foster a desire to have the newest, and usually better, cards. “\textsc{[T]}he rarity aspects of CSGs is their keystone and players regularly displayed their rare cards/figures to other players as a way of expressing both their authenticity as subcultural insiders and their status \textit{vis-à-vis} other players.”\textsuperscript{22} These different factors tend to make some game materials (for \textsc{Magic} is mostly the cards, but also includes items like cards sleeves and playmats) more collectable than others, which is one of the defining factors of collectable games like \textsc{Magic}.

In Chapter One I used the example of the card Tarmogoyf to show the potential fluctuations in value and economic factors that are possible within \textsc{Magic}. The combination of rarity and game play versatility are the two biggest factors in a card’s perceived value, which creates different demand patterns for consumption (the basic concepts that lead to commodity fetishism). Through these different patterns of consumption players assemble collections of game-related materials (in the case of \textsc{Magic}, mostly cards) that can reflect a status of identity. Williams is correct to attribute this collective aspect of consumption to a form of cultural capital. “Gamers seek out these rare and/or powerful items either as a form of curatorial consumption or to use during gameplay. In both instances, owning such items enhances their prestige within local, regional, national, and international player networks.”\textsuperscript{23} This means that the depth and variability of a person’s collection has implications for status within the community. Rare and
expensive cards create potential for higher status, which is all based on an exchange and perceptions of commodities.

A player’s collection is not the only means by which identity is created. Kinkade and Katovich find games like Magic different from other subcultures because they see Magic as unanchored in a physical space, like a bar or dancehall. For these two scholars, Magic is more about a person’s status as a participant. They wrote:

In a broad sense, MTG belongs to a group of gaming cultures that rely on emergent rules, cooperative associations, and fantasy theme constructions. As with role-playing games, such as Dungeons and Dragons, rules and symbols associated with MTG change and emerge over time. As with more conventional tournament games, such as chess, clear winners emerge as victors over conquered competitors. Furthermore, scoring and rankings become significant symbols understood by all competitors. However, beyond broad similarities, the particular differences between MTG and other games stand out as points of interest to sociological investigators. In MTG, “the play” is not necessarily “the thing.” Becoming a participant, being identified as a participant, and acknowledging such participation contribute to the dynamics of the game.²⁴

Kinkade and Katovich recognized that play and competition matter as forms of identification, the basic element of becoming a participant as key to the community. This point becomes more salient when considering that they had to spend months at various card shops, getting to know players and participating within the subculture to conduct this research. This point is also a defining aspect for Magic, separating it from other games.

Aside from collecting practices and participation, some of the processes of play also help construct Magic’s community. Metagaming is a concept ingrained in Magic’s competitive side
that can only exist through an imagined community. If Magic’s community was not imagined, metagaming would not be possible. Metagaming is a nebulous concept from competitive gaming that has different meanings depending on what game is involved. Metagaming involves a player trying to predict or speculate on certain actions or expectations of their opponent. It is a process of educated guessing and altering your own actions based on imaginative understandings and assumptions about your opponent’s actions.

Before I delve into how Magic’s metagaming works, I want to provide an example of metagaming from a simpler game: Rock, Paper, Scissor (RPS). This game is normally played by two people who pick one of these three options (rock, paper, or scissors) simultaneously and one is declared a winner based on the picks. Rock beats scissors, scissors beats paper, and paper beats rock, with any identical picks resulting in a tie and therefore a rematch. The choice of options is relatively random, because there is no perceived incentive to pick one option over the other. A professional game designer and theorist, David Sirlin, used an example of a RPS scenario that highlights the potential depth of metagaming. Sirlin assigned the different in-game choices with different monetary values, which moves the game from a set of equally random choices to foreseeable, weighted outcomes.

Now consider the same game of RPS with unequal (but clearly defined) payoffs. If you win with rock, you win $10. If you win with scissors, you win $3. If you win with paper, you win $1. Which move do you play? You clearly want to play rock, since it has the highest payoff. I know you want to play rock. You know I know you know, and so on. Playing rock is such an obvious thing to do, you must realize I'll counter it every time. But I can't counter it (with paper) EVERY time, since then you could play scissors at will for a free $3. In fact, playing scissors is pretty darn sneaky. It counters paper--the weakest
move. Why would you expect me to do the weakest move? Are you expecting me to play paper just to counter your powerful rock? Why wouldn't I just play rock myself and risk the tie? You're expecting me to be sneaky by playing paper, and you're being doubly sneaky by countering with scissors. What you don't realize is that I was triply sneaky and I played the original obvious move of rock to beat you.²⁵

In the above example, Sirlin’s logical discussion and breakdown of options is the process of metagaming. Sirlin uses this RPS example to show how complex a game with only three options can be. This example is a set up for the more complicated variation that is played out in competitive virtual fighting games, which work under similar logical breakdowns, but with more options. His example proves a very powerful and human phenomenon that is the basis behind metagaming as a concept. Metagaming is basically this attempt at an educated guess or trying to figure out your opponent’s strategy or future action. This process in turn affects your actions, which affects how you play. At the same time, your opponent could also be trying to figure out your actions. Players are interacting and playing based on perceived intent and hunches about one another, sometimes even on multiple levels.

The metagaming concept as applied to Magic gets very complex when you consider that over 12,000 different Magic cards have been printed. Metagaming can be something as simple as playing one card versus another, or something as complex as choosing to play an entirely different deck based on what decks you expect opponents to play. Magic tournaments that require players to bring their own decks to compete also include what is called a fifteen card “sideboard.” Tournament rules require a sideboard to be either zero or fifteen cards that are separate from the player’s deck of cards. The standard for Magic events is for players to play the best two of three games, which means a player does not normally win a match until s/he has won
two games. The sideboard exists so that after the first game is completed, players may swap cards between their deck and their sideboard (at a one card for one card exchange). This allows players to adjust their decks based on the cards their opponent is playing in an attempt to make the matchup more favorable. What fifteen cards a player includes in the sideboard is based on an imagined concept of what the other players would be playing. Once a tournament has begun a player cannot alter his/her deck, which means a deck and sideboard need to be created solely based on prior assumptions about what other players might be playing.

The whole existence of the game concept of a sideboard shows how integral the concept of metagaming is to playing any form of competitive Magic. Metagaming is a source for some of the inherent strategy within the game and is one of the major reasons that so much content and writing is produced about Magic on a regular basis. There is this push to have the latest best card, have the strategy that will help players defeat all the other decks and win. When certain decks and strategies become better than others, those decks become “established”. This means certain combination of cards into decks become common strategies and ways to play the game. Sometimes the established list of decks is even referred to as the Metagame.

Players alter or tweak these previously established ideas to try to gain an advantage over the competition. This idea is supplemented by weekly articles, podcasts, forum discussions, tournament reports and results, and even live broadcasting of events where players can vicariously watch games and get experience. Yet this whole process of metagaming is based on the principle of what a player perceives from belonging to the Magic community. Even though metagaming can be based in what players have done in the past, it is still an imaged process of what a person assumes the tournament environment will look like. The concept and process of metagaming is the backbone to the competitive Magic experience.
This discussion of metagaming hints at a dialectic tension within the *Magic* community: casual play versus competitive play. The spectrum of play includes the desire to play with aesthetics, for engagement, for fun, and to win. Yet, defining *Magic* as a leisure urban subculture, does the caveat of leisure diminish the aspects of seriousness? It is difficult to make a strong distinction between serious and fun because these concepts are difficult to define and vary from person to person. Is competitive or ‘serious play’ only playing in tournaments, or is it a certain play style, using a certain deck or cards, or is it playing a certain format? This distinction varies from person to person and makes it impossible to really define what the difference is, despite continuous discussion within the community about the two.

In his research with *Magic* and *Mage Knight* players, Williams found that casual players were viewed as poorer and worse players, but willing to experiment and try new things and focused on fun. Serious players on the other hand were thought to desire winning no matter the cost (which leads to perceptions of them as having more money or at least being willing to invest more money into a game) and usually to lack creativity (getting deck ideas from online sources or tournament reports, which is called netdecking and is a result of metagaming). He writes: “Gamers who relied on powerful items to assure them of victory were seen as lacking the skills that made them ‘real’ players. The advanced players regularly complained that *Magic* and *Mage Knight* tournaments were overrun with inexperienced players using ‘over-powered’ decks.”

“Many (especially more experienced) players considered these players inauthentic because they relied on powerful cards/figures to play the game from them – they did not focus on developing their own skills,” he concludes.

Outside of the *Magic* tournament scene various ways to play *Magic* exist, with each of these ways lumped together under the header of “casual formats.” Wizards of the Coast
maintains records of a variety of casual formats, which are basically variations of ways to play *Magic* that are not supported by an official tournament structure. Wizards, along with other websites, posts weekly content and articles geared towards casual *Magic* players. Casual *Magic* can be seen as playing the game with play groups altering the game rules (aka house rules), playing without tournament restrictions (mostly on card availability and quantity), or other variations. Casual, by this definition, is “without definite or serious intention; careless or offhand; irregular or occasional.” The word carries these connotations in *Magic*, usually meaning a mild engagement with the game, whether the depth of play or the frequency of play. This concept of “casual play” is often incorrectly put in binary opposition with “serious play,” yet these are not mutually exclusive.

Just because people experience, play and view *Magic* differently does not mean the level of engagement or fun can be determined to be higher or lower for a particular group. Erving Goffman discusses this complex blurring between serious and casual in relation to fun. He writes:

> Games can be fun to play, and fun alone is the approved reason for playing them. The individual, in contrast to his treatment of “serious” activity, claims a right to complain about a game that does pay its way in immediate pleasure and whether the game is pleasurable or not, to plead a slight excuse, such as an indisposition of mood, for not participating. Goffman is stating that the main function of games tends to be perceived enjoyment and that every player harbors the right to complain about games that do not fulfill the desired functions of fun. Humans play games to experience fun, which explains games’ long human history and appeal. If there were not some explicit payoff of fun, people would find other ways to spend their
leisure time. Yet this does not discredit taking games seriously, but shows how muddled the
distinction between serious and fun can be.

Gary Alan Fine also questions the dichotomy of fun and seriousness in relation to role-
playing games. Fine notes that part of the appeal of games is their ability to be an escape away
from the world of serious matters. Despite being an escape from serious matters (which is true
for most of popular culture), the ability to interact with these games on a serious level is not
prevented.

The possibility of “engrossment” —distancing oneself from the “serious” world —produces
the “fun”. Games are “fun” because we think they are worthwhile in themselves. The
engrossment is in itself the indicator of success, and the game is structured to maximize
the engrossment. However, recognizing the enjoyment inherent in playing the game does
not mean that gaming is unrelated to the “serious world”. 34

Fine makes sure to point out that engrossment with the game itself is at the core of the “fun”, but
at the same time is not divorced from the serious. Part of the fun can be a serious, devoted
dedication to the game itself, resulting in high engrossment and emotional involvement. Part of
the fun that is derived from games comes from people finding the games worthwhile in terms of
time and money, which for some equates to different levels of seriousness. This seriousness
tends to be based on the amount of time spent playing and thinking about the game or the amount
of money and resources spent on the game, which supports Williams’ discussion of how
consumption constructs status.

Jane McGonigal, in her book Reality is Broken, discusses not only the positive emotional
kickbacks possible from engrossment with games, but also how games can be a positive,
challenging experience. For McGonigal, one of the key concepts tied to game engagement is fiero:

It’s a craving for challenges that we can overcome, battles we can win, and dangers we can vanquish...It involves three different structures of the reward circuitry of the brain, including the mesocorticolimbic center, which is most typically associated with reward and addiction. Fiero is a rush, unlike any other rush, and the more challenging the obstacle we overcome, the more intense the 'fiero.'

McGonigal draws on cognitive science, as well as game research, to show that most games, when challenging, produce some degree of fiero. It is this cognitive and emotional response that makes games truly engaging, which results in their fun and popularity.

McGonigal then argues that for a game to be successful it has to have a certain level of fiero; otherwise the game is boring and players will find something else to occupy their leisure time. This only further complicates the distinction between casual and serious players because the casual gamer will still need some degree of engagement with and feedback from the game or otherwise lose interest. To some degree a player interacts and is involved with the game, but that exact degree does not need to be defined. This allows for a spectrum of players to each experience and participate within the Magic community differently. I find this inclusion of people with different levels of play ability within the community to be one of the reasons for the game’s success. These varied, yet shared experiences help foster a community that is responsible for Magic’s success and longevity.

Who is the typical person within this Magic community? In an interview with ICv2, Hasbro’s Chief Marketing Officer John Frascotti described the Magic consumer as perceived by the company: “Frascotti also talked about the unique nature of the Magic consumer. The
A typical Magic player is a male high school or college student, although the full age range is 16 to 35. He’s a technology early adopter, and engages with the game in multiple ways: online and on console at home, in store, or at competitive events.\textsuperscript{37} The player base is primarily male and tends to skew towards younger adulthood. This makes sense since Magic products come with a 13-and-up age suggestion, clearly marking the product as not suitable for very young children. In 2008 a survey on trading card game demographics found that the average age of Magic players was 25,\textsuperscript{38} which is right in the center of Frascotti’s age range. It should not be overlooked that the community is male-centric. The representative names used by Wizards for player types also reflected an assumed male player base (Johnny, Spike, Timmy, and Vorthos). The vast majority of participants are men, but that does not mean woman do not play nor enjoy Magic.\textsuperscript{39} However, the gender makeup of the player base directly influences the community because the community membership is generated from players.

Fracscotti also notes the average length of time a player spends engaged with Magic:

“The average tenure of the Magic consumer is over eight years. And the more engaged the Magic consumer becomes in brand the more value they are to us as a business, as we migrate them toward successively deeper levels of engagement with complementary analog and digital experiences.”\textsuperscript{40} The responses I received to my questionnaire line up with Frascotti’s estimate. While the sample size is small, twenty-three out of twenty-nine respondents had been playing Magic for eight years or more. Magic has been around almost twenty years, which may explain the extension of the consumer base upwards to the mid-thirties. This is not to say that there are not players outside this range (both younger and older), but the lasting popularity of the game and the existence of a perceived community helps engage players over longer periods of time. Players, once involved with Magic, tend to be involved for a significant period of time.
In conclusion, Magic’s community is based on an imagined concept of a collection of individuals, united by their shared interest in Magic, unrestricted by limitations of space and time, who act in accordance with their imagined idea of community. This shared interest is fostered by a game that many find fun and spend a significant amount of energy and money on. Magic’s community is distinct from the overarching trading card game subculture. Often there is overlap between the two, but Magic’s own success has helped separate it from other games. Kinkade, Katovich, and Williams tried to pinpoint the source of authentic identity for people involved with Magic, which I ultimately find to reside within the community. Players have different experiences and conceptualizations of serious and fun play, but this only further diversifies the community, instead of segregating it.

NOTES

8. This includes people outside their social circles and people living within short distances. According to the responses to my survey, 23 of 27 people play in spaces that allow for this type of interaction.
9. This included Wizard’s official Magic website which publishes two or three new articles Monday through Friday, and strategy websites like Starcitygames.com and Channelfireball.com which publish multiple articles and videos on a daily basis. Many websites, including the three mentioned previously, have paid writers who create content to be uploaded the same time every week.
10. As of February 10th 2012, on www.mtgcast.com/ 193 different podcast productions were being produced, each with its own multitude of episodes, putting the total number of podcasts over 1,000.
11. For at least the last five years Wizards has live-streamed online the top eight play-offs of a Pro Tour event, but recently with Pro Tour Dark Ascension (Feb. 10-12, 2012) Wizards started to stream matches and coverage of the entire professional event. Star City Games started their own tournament series with an event almost every week in one city in the continental US. Since the beginning this tournament series has broadcast matches live from the event via their website and web crew. These live streamings of tournaments include video crews and commentators who
comment on the game as it goes on to help the audience follow along. This model resembles a sports commentating style.

12 As of February 7th, 2012, Mtgsalvation.com, one of the largest Magic message boards, had 7,624,094 forum posts with a membership of 93,317 registered users.

13 http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/gathering

14 http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/gathering


16 Rosewater, “25 Random Things About Magic”.


19 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 6.


21 Wizards usually releases four expansion sets for Magic every year as well as a base or core set. In 2011, Wizards released Mirrodin Besiege (155 cards), New Phyrexia (175 cards), m12 (249 cards), Innistrad (264 cards), and Magic2012 (249 cards). Over the last few years Wizards has also released an additional product during the summer. In 2011 the Commander Deck products were released including five different decks of 100 cards (which contained cards never printed before). These numbers do not include the Event Decks, Pre-constructed Decks, Duel Decks, From the Vaults, Planeswalker’s Toolkits, and other card products that are also released every year alongside the larger expansion releases.

22 Williams, “Consumption and Authenticity,” 91-92.

23 Williams, “Consumption and Authenticity,” 79.


26 Most Magic rounds are timed, usually fifty minutes, which leaves the possibility of ties if a player has not won in the allotted time.

27 This is usually in the form of previous tournament results. If a deck wins an event or had multiple showings that placed, it is expected that some form of that deck will be around for some amount of time. This is also how deck archetypes become established and how a group of decks can become the ‘Metagame’.

28 Williams, “Consumption and Authenticity,” 94.

29 Williams, “Consumption and Authenticity,” 95.


31 These sites include magicthegathering.com, starcitygames.com, channelfireball.com, gatheringmagic.com, plus others.

32 http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/casual


34 Gary Alan Fine, Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983), 53.


36 McGonigal, Reality is Broken, 34.


39 There has been a large discussion within the community over the past year about women’s involvement within Magic, how it can be increased, and what factors might be responsible for the small number of women players.

40 ICv2, “‘Magic’ Doubled Since 2008.”
CHAPTER III. HOW A MAGIC COMMUNITY WAS BUILT

Magic’s community is created and reinforced through official and unofficial community building. In this chapter I explore the implications of Wizard of the Coast’s official sanctioning and creation of community. The organizational structure that Wizards consciously built over Magic’s existence is a large part of the game’s success. I will also discuss how the company sometimes incorporates unofficial cultural expressions and game forms created by the community into the official community building, strengthening and perpetuating the community. Overall it is this symbiotic process that has led to Magic’s success and strength as a cultural product.

One important thing to remember is that Magic is part of a mostly copyrighted subculture. Gary Alan Fine lays out this idea in relation to Dungeons and Dragons, but it is also applicable to Magic and many other games. The idea of a copyrighted subculture is based around the fact that a person, group, or business owns the copyrights to the text and/or practice at the core of the community.¹ Wizards of the Coast and Hasbro own the copyright to Magic and therefore have a certain level of control. These companies control what cards are made, how they are made, how they are distributed, what cards are tournament viable (through practices like official bannings), what tournaments receive official sanctioning and even who is allowed to play in these events.² This differentiates communities that are controlled via copyrights from those that are not (like Fine’s example of mushroom collecting). This official copyright control over the community adds another layer to the dissection of the community.

One form of Wizard’s assertion of control over Magic is the tournament structure that has been built over the last fifteen years. The pinnacle of the tournament structure is the Magic Pro Tour. The Pro Tour started in 1996 as a way to facilitate competitive Magic playing and grow the
brand.\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Magic} had been selling well as a game, but there was no infrastructure to get players playing outside their small circles of friends.\textsuperscript{4} The Pro Tour was started by giving out large monetary prizes to players who placed in the event and eventually making these events exclusive (meaning that the events are not open to the public and can be played only by players who qualified for the event). The Pro Tour has become the symbol for competitive \textit{Magic}, creating a swath of professional \textit{Magic} players. Since the Pro Tour, other events have been created to help bridge the gap between very competitive \textit{Magic} and not so competitive \textit{Magic}, as well as providing players a way to qualify for the Pro Tour. This helped create an entire system of tournaments and events where players could now play against different opponents and meet new people.

These events are structured to help tier the style, seriousness and involvement of the player’s engagement. Similar to how a multilayered structure was imposed on Little League baseball in order for the league system to work,\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Magic} needed a system to promote play. There cannot be a league without enough individual teams of players while at the same time it is very difficult to generate enough teams without a league to support them.\textsuperscript{6} This idea could be compounded to reflect the overall structural elements of sports like baseball, which include various leagues and levels to incorporate different levels of engagement and fun. Fine uses this idea to argue that, without some form of official sanctioning, it can be difficult for some leisure subcultural pursuits to grow beyond a small member base.

Just like local baseball leagues who are responsible for supplying equipment, personnel, space and the temporal organization\textsuperscript{7} for the game to be successful and even possible, Wizards of the Coast, along with the support of local card shops and stores, is responsible for \textit{Magic}’s structure. In his research, Fine wants to “deemphasize a voluntaristic, personal preference model
of leisure subcultures, in which people engage in those activities that they like best or those that serve their personal needs, in favor of a more structural, organizationally conscious perspective in which individuals engage in activities that are more available and that have a reputation for being more fun. Fine’s point is very significant. It is not enough to say that *Magic* is successful just because people find it to be fun and because it fulfills some personal need, whatever that may be. A large part of *Magic’s* success is the organizational structure that has been consciously built over the last two decades. This structure not only reinforces engagement for those who participate, but also acts as an invitation for new players. “People are free to engage in a virtually unlimited number of leisure activities, but that freedom is possible because others have laid the organizational groundwork that facilitates these choices.” While there might be multiple choices of games for people to engage with, part of the selection of this choice is predicated on the principle that there is an explicit structure and the quality of that structure. People can be drawn to *Magic* because of its ubiquity and status within the TCG subculture, regardless of perceptions of the quality of fun.

The typical structure for baseball leagues involves officially sanctioned events that usually start out with T-ball leagues, then move up to Little League, then up to Pony and high school teams, then off to college, into the minors and stopping at the majors. This system allows for an individual to engage with the game over a significant length of time, and it allows participants to hone abilities and increase involvement. While *Magic* does not have a robust structural system like baseball, nor is it easily broken down by obvious distinctions like age, it still is analogous. *Magic* has the basic casual level: just playing the game with friends. This could be viewed as similar to a pickup game of baseball (or basketball, soccer or any other sport), where a person’s abilities or depth of knowledge about the leisure activity are only important
relative to the knowledge of the others who are playing. In other words, a person could range from skilled to inept in regards to the activity. It does not matter how great or terrible a player is as long as the other players are within a similar play range.

The lower-tiered sanctioned tournament events, which include events like Friday Night Magic (FNM), are the least competitive events with official DCI support. Players are ranked through the DCI as a way to create a hierarchy of players based on how well they are doing. Each event has a multiplier for points based on how competitive the event is. The more points a player earns the better, and players can gains points by playing in DCI sanctioned events. Wins are worth more points than ties, which are worth more points than losses, so it encourages a player to win. Events like FNM are considered to be on the low end of the scale and are worth a relatively low number of points. This is also reinforced by the number of participants and the location. The vast majority of these events are anchored in local cards shops and usually restricted to the local groups of players living within reasonable driving distance of the venue. Friday Night Magic is promoted as an entry level tournament environment that is friendlier towards inexperiened and less competitively inclined players.

In the next tier of events are the Pro Tour Qualifiers and Grand Prixes, which are open to a general audience. These events have higher entry costs; depending on the format, PTQs and GPs range from $25-$40, whereas FNM usually ranges from free to $15. These events constantly change locations, and Grand Prixes are held all around the world, usually in major cities. PTQ locations also change, with any one venue hosting only two PTQs every three months. These events also attract larger groups of players and usually draw people who drive hours to attend the event. Grand Prix, while open to the public, is consider a pro event and attracts players who fly in from different countries to compete. Grand Prixes are two day events, with players qualifying
for the second day based on their first-day records. The size and scale of these events are very
different. Forty players is an enormous turnout for an FNM, three hundred for a PTQ, and a
thousand for a GP.

Next come National events, which are invitation-only events held once a year. The top
three players get to represent their countries at Worlds.\textsuperscript{10} The last tier is the Pro Tour circuit
events, which are invite-only events held four times a year. These multiday events are considered
the highest level of competition for the game, which is reinforced through the prize payout\textsuperscript{11} and
live event coverage. This event coverage includes certain tables with overhead cameras that
record people playing and are live streamed via the internet. The coverage of these games is also
facilitated by live commentary, usually by two men, to help viewers follow along with the game
or explain what is happening within the game. This is similar to how commentary is done for
sporting events.

Despite the fact that \textit{Magic} was created in the United States, the \textit{Magic} community
transcends the national borders into a global community. This is shown in a few different ways.
First, \textit{Magic} is printed in eleven different languages, reflecting an emphasis on being a global
property and being accessible to non-English-speaking persons. Second, the professional circuit
for \textit{Magic} is very open to international players. Grand Prixes and Pro Tour events are held in
various locations around the world. In 2011, the Pro Tour events were held in Paris, France;
Nagoya, Japan; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Worlds were in San Francisco, California.
There were also many Grand Prixes that year in Canada, China, England, Germany, Japan, the
United States, and many other countries. This was also supported by many national events that
resulted in forty-one different national teams competing at Worlds to see which country would
be victorious, just like a \textit{Magic} version of the Olympics.\textsuperscript{12} Professional \textit{Magic} is heavily
emphasized as a global competition that allows players to compete regardless of their spatial restrictions. It should not be overlooked that smaller, nonprofessional events (like Friday Night Magic) are also very popular around the world.

Not only is Magic sold as a global product, global implications are considered when the game is being designed. For many years, if a Magic card featured a human skeleton, the art would be altered when printed in Chinese. This was due a Chinese cultural taboo on skeletons, which Wizards was careful not to offend. Yet, after a few years Wizards wanted to produce some cards that would feature various skeletons and were not sure how to pull this off due to issues with the Chinese market. Elaine Chase, an employee in the Wizard’s Brand Department, discussed what Wizards ultimately did:

We took a look at the current state of the Chinese games market to see what has changed since we started selling Magic there. While skeletons are still not exactly "polite," they have turned more into an unlucky symbol that the older generation reacts much more strongly to than the younger, games-playing population. Video games have really opened up what is considered acceptable, and if anything, the use of such "edgy" images can be seen as a draw to our audience. Society hasn't changed to anything-goes in regards to representing the dead, but the Wizards of the Coast office in charge of China agreed to let us proceed with Grixis.

Despite previously making changes to cards, they decided to no longer follow this process because the cultural climate in China had shifted. This is significant considering the fact that that year (2008) a card was released in the set with the name Skeletonize, depicting a person turning into a skeleton. This policy shows a constant and invested interest in the cultural sensibilities of the global demographics in which Magic is sold. Magic is not just a product made by Americans
for Americans with some minor international sales. It is a global game, made for a global community.

The importance of this structure is reinforced when considering other game lines within the same subculture as *Magic*. Other cards games have come and gone and some have been more popular and successful than *Magic* at different points in time. Yet no other card game has had either the longevity or the consistent results that *Magic* has experienced. This speaks to not only the strength of *Magic* as a game, but the importance of the community. For example, when the *Pokémon TCG* was released in 1998 it was widely popular in the United States and internationally.¹⁵ The *Pokémon TCG* was released through Wizards of the Coast in America, but after a few years Wizards’ license was revoked and it is now held by Nintendo. *Pokémon TCG* was the first TCG to outsell *Magic* in the United States¹⁶ but was targeted at a much younger audience. The *Pokémon TCG* was part of the larger Pokémon mania that was sweeping the globe at the time and was the first TCG to gain national attention. A few years later, the mania started to severely wane, but over the last few years there has been a resurgence in popularity. The *Pokémon TCG* still has an extensive organized play system made up of various levels of tournaments, including National and World events.¹⁷

Another card game, *The Spoils*, produced by Tenacious Games and released in November 2006, was blatant in its attempt to displace *Magic*. I attended Gencon in 2007, which was the first time the convention had been held since *The Spoils* was released. I visited their demonstration booth, and the rhetoric that was used by those promoting the game was that *The Spoils* was not only better than *Magic*, but it was only a matter of time before it took over *Magic*’s success as a competitive card game. I had a few friends who were in the original Beta release and the initial release of the set, which also echoed a similar tenacity towards *Magic*. 
Tenacious Games tried to push the game with a one million dollar tournament professional circuit, island cruises and bus events throughout 2007. The game had issues taking off, which resulted in Tenacious Games not following through with many of the promised tournament prizes. *The Spoils* as a game disappeared at the end of 2007 and was reintroduced in 2010 by a different company named Arcane Tinmen. I also attended Gencon 2010 when *The Spoils* kicked off its relaunch, this time with the same rhetoric but without the grandiose tournament rewards. *The Spoils* has yet to overthrow *Magic*.

The *VS System*, released in 2004, was produced by the company Upperdeck. *VS System* was a trading card game based on super heroes and comic book properties from DC Comics, Marvel and others. *VS* tried to topple *Magic* as the leading competitive card game by hosting tournaments with large payouts (most were $10,000) that were less cumbersome to qualify for than *Magic*’s Pro Tour. *VS*’s tournament scene flourished for a short period of time, even pulling away some *Magic* professional players due to the increased cash prizes. Yet, after a few years *VS System*’s tournament structure proved to be unsustainable and the game was discontinued in 2009.\(^{18}\)

Upperdeck was also responsible for the distribution of the *Yu-Gi-Oh* TCG outside of Japan until 2008. *Yu-Gi-Oh* first took off in the United States in 1999, roughly the same time as the *Pokémon* TCG. Part of these games’ overall appeal was that *Yu-Gi-Oh*, as well as *Pokémon*, was targeted at a younger demographic than *Magic* or even *VS system*. *Yu-Gi-Oh* was based on multiple properties: various animated television shows, and digital game variations released on Nintendo’s handheld systems as well as Sony’s PlayStation consoles. *Yu-Gi-Oh*, just like *Magic*, has had cycles of success over the years. Yet in 2008, with a legal dispute between Konami (The Japanese company that owns and distributes the Japanese version) and Upperdeck, parts of the
Yu-Gi-Oh tournament and event structure, as well as new cards, were temporarily halted, which caused some turmoil within the brand and structure for a length of time.\textsuperscript{19}

Another former Upperdeck line, the World of Warcraft TCG, kicked off in 2005. This was another game based on a previous property, this time the very popular online video game World of Warcraft (or WOW for short). Part of the WOW TCG’s early success was due to the inclusion of loot cards, which were randomly inserted in booster packs that had codes that could be redeemed for rewards in the original digital game World of Warcraft. Many of these rare loot cards were highly sought after for their crossover rewards, with some cards fetching hundreds of dollars. The Spectral Tiger loot card initially sold for around $2,000.00 after its release.\textsuperscript{20} The WOW TCG holds the record for the highest single monetary prize given out at a professional event, $100,000.\textsuperscript{21} WOW TCG, while still in production (as of 2012), had a similar tournament arc to the one experienced by VS System. It experienced a surge for the first year or two, but then support was cut back. In 2010 WOW TCG rights were stripped from Upperdeck and picked up by the company Cryptozoic Entertainment.

These games are just a small sample of the trading card games that have spawned since Magic kick-started the card game subculture. This is not to imply that Wizards has not had issues with Magic, nor to say there have not been cutbacks on events and prize support for Magic. It is also not to say that other card games, including the ones previously mentioned, were never successful, nor that they might not be successful in the future (Pokémon and Yu-Gi-Oh are both on strong upswings). It is to say that Magic’s infrastructure and official support has allowed it to remain relatively strong and consistent for over fifteen years. Magic is different than the other popular TCGs that have had more severe cycles of ups and downs. In the example of VS System, there was a hurried attempt at becoming the most competitively played card game by offering
large financial incentives. Yet the attempts at cultivating this community were too quick and the game fell apart. The company could not keep up with the economic support and there was not a strong enough player-based support system. These growing pains were a few of the big reasons why the game only lasted five years.

Game lines like *VS System* and *The Spoils* specifically tried to usurp *Magic*’s popularity and status. This has yet to happen. It is not that *Magic* is inherently better than these games or more fun, but it shows the importance of a strong, official structure. *VS System, The Spoils, and WOW* initially kicked off their tournament structures with offers of larger cash purses than *Magic* was offering. While this helped generate some pull for these game lines, the games either did not last, had to greatly reduce their prize support, or even stopped producing new cards. Many of these games underwent changes in company ownership at one point or ceased production. This suggests that giving away large amounts of money does not equate to success. It reiterates the need for copyright subcultures to have an official structure that resonates with the game’s community. *Magic*’s Research and Development team spends months developing, creating, testing, and tweaking the products to make sure what is released is not only something players will like, but also good for the game. In the final 2011 quarterly reports, *Magic* was the top in hobby games (with *Yu-Gi-Oh* in second place and *Pokémon* taking fifth) and *Magic* was rated the top collectable card game overall. *Magic* came in second behind *Pokémon* in the top mass channel collectable games for that quarter.

While these games have not commandeered *Magic*’s ubiquity within gaming communities, they have helped construct a stronger overall subculture. *Magic* and its community, along with other card games, have helped create a space for people, especially young kids, where they can excel and feel included. David Kushner, adjunct professor in
Journalism at New York University, spent a few years traveling, talking, and interacting with professional Magic players as research for his book. Kushner’s book, Jonny Magic and the Card Shark Kids, is part biography of the professional Magic player Jon Finkel and his life journey and part exposition on Magic’s cultural influences. Discussing Jon Finkel’s introduction to Magic and how that can be reflective of a generation’s experience overall, Kushner writes:

All around the world, once disenfranchised kids like Finkel – those ones who were a little too smart or too weird to play on the ball fields – now had a means to express themselves and compete from a very young age. Just as kids with musical ability could join the school band or young athletes could join a sports team, kids with brains and strategy skills could develop and discover themselves through Pokémon and Magic. In the past, there was no such community in place for the future card sharks of the world. They, like Finkel in his early youth, just got lost in the shuffle. Now, however, they had somewhere to go. Trading card games were like their Little Leagues, and baseball cards, too. First they played Pokémon. Then, around age twelve, they moved on to Magic. Along the way, they’d meet other gifted smart peers and find a sense of belonging. In pizza parlors, school lunchrooms, hobby shops, they sharpened their minds, refined their skills, and found their edge. And with millions of baby sharks on the rise, there was no telling where they would go.24

Magic was able to provide a community, along with a sense of belonging, for a young generation who felt disconnected from previous options. There had not yet existed a leisure activity that fit the needs and desires that ended up being fostered through collectable/strategic card games. Kushner observed in his research a new cultural phenomenon that Magic’s made possible.
He also observed a growing cluster of young people who grew up on various card games that were changing and challenging the way staple gambling games, like poker and blackjack, were played. Out of this fantasy card game community came a group of young adult players who had experience, skills, and wherewithal never quite seen before. Kushner states:

While the poker players sniffed out the Magic players, the smart, weird boys continued to sharpen, and exploit, their games. Magic had its biggest year ever, capitalizing on the fantasy crazy to earn more than $125 million. At the same time, trading card games for the preteen set—including Pokémon, Duel Masters, and Yu-Gi-Oh!—lured millions of new players into the sport of cards every year. A system and culture were in place. Pokémon players would grow into Magic, then Magic players would grow into poker. The kids who used to be sidelined now had a culture in which they could refine their skills. The game of cards, after all these year, had become not only a sport, but a home.\(^{25}\)

The year David Kushner refers to in his statement was 2004. What was emerging then has grown exponentially in the next eight years. The year 2004 happened to also coincide with the tremendous surge in Texas Hold’em poker, which caught the public attention during the early 2000’s. Through ESPN coverage of the World Series of Poker and the World Poker Tour, movies like Rounders, and pushes from local groups as well as casinos, it seemed like the United States had card playing fever.

It was during the height of this poker craze that professional Magic players like Jon Finkel made the exodus from Magic to card games with higher stakes. Kushner observed a difference between the players who were migrating from fantasy card games like Magic to poker and those players who only played poker. He ultimately found that the Magic players had grown up playing intensely, under lots of pressure, and had become accustomed to the heavy demands
of professional card games even better than some professional poker veterans. There was now a culture of young adults who grew up on cards, flooding the gambling worlds with unprecedented skill for their age. He also found that, through the popularity of Texas Hold’em, card games had been legitimized as acceptable forms of leisure. This trickled down to games like *Magic* and helped make the games not only more popular, but more mainstream as well.

Games like *Pokémon TCG* or *Yu-Gi-Oh*, targeted at younger audiences (children), allow for an entrance into the card gaming subculture at an early age. These games could be seen as gateway games, getting people involved and experienced with the games when they are fairly young. Then these players can move on to other games like *Magic* when they get older. This is how I got into the subculture, as well as many others I know. This then can evolve into players moving from *Magic* on to other gaming pursuits, like poker or blackjack. This is not to say that other trading card games do not have their own communities nor to place a value judgment on the merits of these games and claim they are inferior to *Magic*. This is to say only that at a minimum level these options of different games for different age groups allow players to shift from game to game while staying within the gaming subculture.

The gaming subculture has been growing tremendously over the last few years, with *Magic* leading this growth. According to an ICv2 report on the hobby game industry’s growth during the summer of 2011: “*Magic: The Gathering* continues to lead the collectible and over-all hobby game market, and despite big sales in the year ago period appears to be continuing to grow, with recent changes in organized play and the new expansion, Innistrad, both getting high marks. *Yu-Gi-Oh!, Pokémon*, and *HeroClix* (now including videogame properties) are also all firing on all cylinders in the hobby.” By the end of that same year, the subculture was still growing and hitting record highs, as the report goes on to say:
The hobby game market grew by 20 to 25% in 2011, according to a report in the recently released ICv2’s *Internal Correspondence* #78. This is over twice the growth rate for 2010, already a strong year according to ICv2 reports. Hobby game growth was led by the CCG category, where the Big Three, *Magic: The Gathering*, *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, and *Pokémon*, all had strong years, with *Magic* continuing an incredible multi-year run, *Pokémon* rejuvenated with the new *Black and White* series, and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* especially strong in the hobby.  

These games and their respective communities are the driving force behind the surge in the subculture, not just in terms of numbers of participants, but also in sales and revenue. This raises the question: what exactly has Wizards done over the last few years to lead to the tremendous growth in *Magic*? There was a push for more opportunities, options, interactions and ways to consume *Magic* and related products, but also for deeper levels of player engagement. Mark Rosewater made it very apparent in March of 2008 that one big focus for the company was going to be the acquisition of new players, as well as retention and reacquisition. This also included a push to make new cultural materials outside the realm of the game available, including T-shirts, hats and other apparel. This push not only helped create a space for explicit identity construction through *Magic*, but also made the game more ubiquitous. These changes first started in the summer of 2009 with the release of the set Magic2010. This set initiated a rebranding of the “Core Set”, which in previous years had dismal sales. Stores had issues keeping Magic2010 in stock, which was something *Magic* had not experienced in over a decade, due to difficulty in meeting the early demand for the set. Wizards had taken a series that had relative low impact and sales and turned it into one of their bestselling sets in years.
That fall, with the following set, Zendikar, Wizards had similar difficulty keeping the product in stock. *Magic* product was flying off the shelves.

One reason why Magic2010 and Zendikar kept selling out was because they prioritized well-balanced and interactive limited environments to help push for longer and deeper engagement, as well as better integrating a storyline within the cards. Part of this focus included focusing on cards that were also good for tournament players (Spikes) and well as crafting large story-driven worlds to have more cohesion and appeal to other types of players (Vorthoses). Wizards continued innovating, and Scars of Mirrodin (2010) was the first set to truly embody this entire process, coming to fruition with the release of Innistrad in 2011.\(^3\) Part of this change included providing new, interesting outlets players could be excited about. The first print run of Zendikar included randomly inserted cards from the first year of *Magic*, providing special treasures hidden inside the packs. This is the first and only time Wizards ever did this, but very popular with the community.

This trend has continued with Mirrodin Besieged Pre-release, where players had to choose between two different factions and were given special packs with which to build decks. Then players were supposed to keep records of when they beat someone representing the other faction that day, and report it to the store. The stores then were supposed to report these numbers to Wizards, allowing them to declare a winning faction based on the number of people who chose that faction and won. This allowed people to get invested with the game and feel that their individual actions accumulated into something more. A similar event was held in the spring of 2012 with the Hellvault Pre-releases. For these events Wizards sent out a cardboard diamond-shaped box called the Hellvault, which was covered in numerous seals. Players were given cards with various achievements they had to accomplish. Once players accomplished a number of
achievements during the Pre-release, they turned the cards into the store. For each card turned in, the store broke one of the seals on the Hellvault. Once all the seals were broken, all the players were given extra prizes that were inside. Both of these are examples of events where Wizards added something extra to help generate interest from the community, and were relatively successful.

Another big change involved implementing live coverage of Magic tournaments. Wizards had tried broadcasting the Magic World Championships on ESPN2 channel years before, but it had failed to generate any significant viewership. Now, through the internet, they could live stream matches to those who were interested, with internet connections all around the world. The video coverage of Magic really took off when the video tech group Good Games Live started streaming the weekly Star City Game tournaments in 2010, as well as other tournaments at conventions like Gencon. This method focused on an overhead camera recording live feature matches from the tournament, with commentators in a booth commenting on the games (similar to the approach of sports coverage). After the initial success of this coverage, Star City Games launched their own broadcasting group to cover their tournaments. Wizards of the Coast had been digitally streaming Pro Tour events for the past few years, but it mostly focused on the Top 8 playoff and some minor coverage. In 2012 Wizards made significant changes to their online broadcasts of Pro Tour Events, turning them into three days of broadcasting and coverage, and focusing on all three days of the event instead of just the final day. This weekly coverage helped turn Magic into a spectator activity as well, emphasizing digital and online outlets to make the game more accessible via time and space.

While these focused on increasing engagement for current Magic players, Wizards also found other ways to help broaden Magic’s appeal. This includes a web video series, Walking the
Planes, which explores some of the social aspects of attending professional Magic tournaments for those who might be less familiar with them. Another comedy video series, Load Ready Run, focuses on a group of friends teaching someone how to play Magic and showing how dynamic and fun it is. Both of these video series are attempts to help those who are less familiar with Magic understand the game and community better, as well as providing humor and jokes for those in the know. There has also been non-video marketing in the form of web comics. The web comic series PVP ran a multi-week series that focused on some characters playing Magic and running a Magic tournament. This story arc was funded by Wizards as a form of advertising for the game and was part of test pilot series by Scott Kurtz, writer and artist of the comic strip. The advertising was supposed to be more subliminal, worked into the storyline without being too blatant.

Wizards also released different versions of Magic as new ways to get people involved and experienced with the game. This is mainly done through the game Duel of the Planeswalkers, which is a PlayStation Network, Steam, and Xbox Live downloadable version of Magic. These games were restricted versions of Magic, with regulated card availability and limited deck building options. Yet the game was relatively cheap, with a onetime download fee under twenty dollars. These factors separated Duels from Magic Online, but also provided a space that focused on introduction to and teaching of how to play Magic. Duels of the Planeswalkers was originally released in 2009, syncing up with the other major changes with Magic. Since then, there have been two other versions of the game released, with more cards, challenges, and content. Duels has been a popular game, with over half a million downloads by 2011 on Xbox Live alone. This was the first truly successful digital Magic variant release for gaming consoles, with previous failed attempts including Magic: the Gathering Battlegrounds.
Lastly, there was a focus on releasing apparel and other products, which allowed people to consume and interact with *Magic* outside of the game. This was accomplished by creating T-shirts, hats, backpacks, shoes, leather wristbands, and other accessories featuring *Magic* logos and imagery. Most of these items are available for purchase through online stores, which reflects a rise in availability of *Magic*-related products. This also included releasing special edition Jones Soda bottles that featured *Magic* art, as well as *Magic* iPhone and Android apps. There was also a release of a new comic book series that focused on *Magic* Planeswalkers and *Magic* lore. All these products have created ways for people to consume and buy *Magic* products that are not cards nor directly related to game play.

These changes have resulted in the positive upswing that *Magic* has been experiencing over the last few years. Yet, not everything has been completely embraced by the *Magic* community. There were recent issues with some of the overhauls to the *Magic* structure. In the fall of 2011 Wizards announced substantial changes to the tournament structure, payouts, qualifications, and rating system for *Magic*. This created a backlash from the community, which was anything but quiet about its issues with the proposed changes.

WotC CEO Greg Leeds posted a message “Regarding Premier Play Changes” on Tuesday with a mea culpa, saying “Unfortunately, our plans and communication on the future of *Magic* organized play have upset many in our community... It is obvious now that we have not given enough information on exactly what the new plan will look like to reassure our most dedicated and important players that the changes are positive ones.”

This issue was raised when Wizards announced a complete overhaul of the *Magic* tournament system in the fall of 2011. There was a tremendous reaction to these proposed changes: the
community responded with petitions, e-mails, and articles and by flooding Wizards’ employees’ Twitter accounts with tweets expressing their reactions and concerns.

These concerns generated from professional players, *Magic* Hall of Famers, tournament grinders, and even those less concerned about high level tournament play. These concerns were based on issues with the new changes, the implications of the changes, and people fearing changes to a system they already enjoyed. There was a huge outpouring from the community demanding that the changes not be implemented or be done in a different way. One of the biggest concerns was the way it restructured invites to the Pro Tour, as well as how players could qualify and the benefits awarded to those playing the game professionally. The proposed system favored playing *Magic* as often as possible, without much regard to how well a person did or the context in which he or she was playing. This was proven problematic when a player demonstrated that she was just paying to enter events, dropping after a few rounds, and then joining other events. She was just gaining points by paying and jumping in and out of tournaments, breaking the system and heralding the potential for a degenerate tournament atmosphere where the emphasis would be on grinding rating points, instead of winning or even playing. Weeks after players expressed their concerns, Wizards announced an addendum to the proposed changes. These new changes were a hybrid of the previously announced system, the old system, and the concerns of the community.

The debate over the tournament embodied the struggle for copyrighted subcultures and the communities that revolve around the copyrighted texts. For *Magic*, Wizards prints the cards that are to be played with but also sets up the tournament structure. Wizards steps up the tournaments, with restrictions on cards dictating what is able to be played. Wizards, through the DCI, also regulates tournaments with official rules and enforcement. If players are not following
the rules, they can be reprimanded and even banned from participating in future events. Wizards controls a large amount of the construction of the game. The two major instances of official control are the production of the cards and the tournament structure. Yet, players are constantly creating their own interpretations and variations of the game. These variations are sometimes a way for players to experience the game differently or to try to have fun in a different way. These are unofficial expressions of the game that grow out of the community. Some of these different expressions have later been incorporated and become official. There are two major examples of the unofficial being incorporated into the official: the Elder Dragon Highlander format and the Modern format.

The Elder Dragon Highlander format, or EDH for short, was a variation of *Magic* that was created by the community. EDH was a format with specific restrictions on how many and what cards could be played, and could only be played with decks of exactly 100 cards. This format grew year after year, with more players getting involved, making decks, sharing ideas and discussing the format. Eventually the format drew the interest of the people who design *Magic* cards and it was decided to give the format official support. Wizards printed special cards and decks specific for the format, as well as sanctioning the rules that people had previously adhered to unofficially.

Aaron Forsythe, director of *Magic* R&D, announced the official incorporation of this format. Forsythe said the rationale behind this incorporation was to:

give a popular fan-created format—Elder Dragon Highlander (or EDH for short)—the attention it deserves. Many of us here at Wizards really enjoy the format. . . And while we are pretty hands-on in general, we recognize the importance of keeping the format as player-run, even after we produce products that officially endorse it. To that end, we
worked closely with Sheldon Menery and the rest of the EDH Rules Committee (we're lucky to have one of them, Scott Larabee, in house) to make sure our product adhered to their rules and stayed true to their spirit.\textsuperscript{41}

This format’s rules and restrictions initially were managed by a few members of the \textit{Magic} community. When Wizards made it an official product, they changed the name of the format to Commander, but wanted to keep it within the spirit of the community that created it. This format is an example of how the community created a new way to play and experience \textit{Magic}, separate from the official ways set out by Wizards. After years of popularity within the community, Wizards officially sanctioned and incorporated the format. This meant that Wizards then became the arbiters of the official rules for the format. Wizards also released new cards and decks for this format, now able to make money selling the community products based on an idea created by the community.

Another example of the unofficial becoming official is the Modern format. In 2010 the \textit{Magic} format Legacy had become very popular due to the format being featured in Star City Games Series events that were held almost weekly across the United States, which resulted in high demand for the best cards in that format. Legacy is one of two formats that lets players use cards from any \textit{Magic} set, which means many of the older, better cards that were extremely rare. This led to a large spike in card prices in the secondary market, since many of the cards had not been printed in over a decade. So this format was very popular but has become increasingly difficult for newer players to get involved with due to a price barrier. The standard price for Legacy decks has breached the one thousand mark, with some of the most competitive decks even breaking the two thousand dollar threshold.
There were inherent issues with Legacy, so players were looking for something else to play. Extended was the next oldest format, but it only let players use cards that had been printed within the last four years. There was an overall sense of disinterest in this format due to the perception that it was not much fun and the fact that there were not very many tournaments for people to play in. This started a discussion about a new format to bridge the gulf between Extended, using only cards produced in the preceding four years, and Legacy, using cards produced at any time during the game’s seventeen-year history. The community was discussing a new format that would have a larger availability of cards, but would not go as far back as Legacy to avoid the cards that were expensive due to scarcity and could not be reprinted due to the Reserve List (discussed in Chapter One).

The community came up with two concepts: Modern and Overextended. The formats were very similar, with the only differences being which set each started with and which cards were banned from play. Both of these formats were created in an attempt to quell the concerns and unhappiness with both Legacy and Extended. What is interesting is that this whole movement was created out of a desire and push from the community. Gavin Verhey, a professional Magic player who wrote weekly articles on the game, decided to create the format Overextended. Extended was already a Magic format, but one that very few people played and that was overall disliked. Verhey decided that a new format that players actually liked and found fun could be created to replace Extended. In his article, “Show Up or Shut Up: Overextended or Bust”, he discussed his thoughts on the prospect of a new format and decided that he would be the one to create this new format. He wrote:

I had already been thinking about the format and garnered a lot of attention with a couple Facebook statuses on the format, and this tweetstorm was my tipping point. It became
clear from the interactions that night that there was significant interest in this format. More importantly, due to the high level of attention from Wizards, it showed that if players could prove they were interested, then there was a good chance Wizards would consider making this a real format. Someone in the community needed to amount that proof into actual results. Someone in the community needed to take a stand so other people could follow the charge. Someone in the community needed to do the legwork on the format. I decided that particular someone would be me.43

Verhey felt that this format was something that the Magic community was interested in having. It was also something that, if the community expressed enough interest, could influence the people at Wizards to make the format official. Verhey undertook the personal responsibility for the format by hosting unofficial tournaments on Magic Online, while providing prizes to top finishers out of his own pocket. He also documented the results of the tournaments and collected deck lists to share what people were building and playing. He also used the weekly articles he wrote for Starcitygames.com to promote, advertise and discuss the new format. The community’s interest and participation with the format seemed to grow with every passing week, with more people participating in Verhey’s online tournaments as well as discussing the format as a whole. The interest in the format grew so much that Verhey launched the website mtgoverextended.com to host all of the discussions and tournament results in one digital space. After a few months Wizards announced that the Modern format was becoming a new official format, but cited Verhey’s work cultivating a format within the community as key to the format becoming official.44 Modern and Overextended as formats were very close in concept and either one would help address the issues that first motivated Verhey to start the format. Verhey’s work with the community and this format even helped land him an internship and work for Wizards.
The creation of this new format was due to Wizards responding to the desires of the community. This not only creates spaces where the community’s needs are met, but it also allows for the official stamp of Wizards. In many ways Wizards incorporating a format legitimizes the format. For example, the Modern format has been used recently for Pro Tour Qualifier events, which would have been impossible before the official sanctioning. This allows Modern players to have more opportunities to play in tournaments that support the Pro Tour, which in turn fosters a need for players to construct decks and play. This in turn broadens the scope and availability of the format, allowing people to experience it with greater frequency.

There are other unofficial expressions besides the creations of new formats and ways to play Magic. There has been a new phenomenon over the last few years of card alterations. Card alterations can be broken down into two major distinctions: three-dimensional alters and paint alters. With card alters, it needs to be remembered that the art box on a Magic card is only a few inches of space. The art box is the most common area that is altered, since it leaves information like the card’s name and text box unchanged. Since the space is tiny in comparison to traditional canvases, a certain amount of skill is required to create good looking alters. In three-dimensional alters, multiple copies of the same card are cut up and reassembled to make a 3D rendition of the art. This process ruins the card’s play-ability but moves the object from just a card to more of a piece of artistic expression. The other style of altering cards is not as destructive as cutting cards up. This style involves actually painting, marking, or in some other way changing the original image on the card. The approach varies from simply doodling with a Sharpie on a card to hours of intense painting and priming. These processes range from extending the art that is already on the card to changing the entire image.
Card altering has become very popular within the *Magic* community, and well altered cards can fetch high prices. In January 2011, the card Force of Will was worth around $70.00 for just a normal, regular version. But during this time Terese Nielson, the original artist for the art that is featured on the card Force of Will, put up for sale an altered version of the card. She changed the art to feature Captain Jack Sparrow from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* film franchise, as well as adding visual references to other *Magic* cards. Her alter fetched $1,009.00 on eBay that January. While this example is an extreme case, many alters go for more than double what the original card goes for. Nielson has altered other cards as well, and is not the only *Magic* artist who has altered his or her own work. Magic artists usually only alter cards that already feature their art, and the alter can range from a quick doodle on a card done at a convention to hours of detailed work like the Jack Sparrow Force of Will. This altering process is not restricted to artists who have their art displayed on *Magic* cards; many others have taken to altering cards. This has also led to some artists being upset when their cards are altered, but Wizards has not released any official statements on the policy of altering cards in regards to artistic expression or copyright infringement, only statements regarding tournament play and the use of altered cards. This practice is just another way for players to have unique and different cards, while at the same time expressing themselves and the things they like.

These are just a few examples of how people interact with the game and make *Magic* something different for themselves, while at the same time adding to the overall community. While the majority of the community is facilitated by Wizards through official support, the community is still created and expressed through players’ interactions. This includes people writing about, discussing, and making videos about the game. It includes the annual *Magic Cruise* event, started by a few individuals outside of Wizards, where players spend days traveling
the Caribbean on a luxury boat and playing *Magic*, not to forget the music written about *Magic*, the card alterers, and people pioneering new formats and different ways to play the game. Whether it is official or unofficial, the community is created and expressed through the interaction between players and company.

NOTES


2 The DCI is the organization that is in charge of certifying judges (through taking tests and other requirements) and player bannings and suspensions. To play in a sanctioned *Magic* event, a player must be registered with the DCI and given an identification number that tracks their results, ranks their skills according to other players, and keeps track of their record for warnings, suspensions and bannings. Players can be reprimanded for various actions like cheating, lying to judge, threatening or bribing an opponent, among other actions.

3 Part of the push behind creating the Pro Tour was providing celebrities for fans to follow and root for. Initially Wizards felt that there needed to be heroic and villainous types for people to root for or against.


10 This practice might be disappearing with some new changes in the tournament structure set out by Wizards of the Coast.

11 The first place winner of a Pro Tour wins $40,000. The total money given out at a single Pro Tour is $233,500.00.


These events are divided by age groups. http://www.pokemonworldchampionships.com/2011/worlds/players

This was due to issues in the quality of cards that were being printed in the new sets, the strength of certain cards that needed to be constantly banned, plus other issues that plagued the game and created detrimental issues.


This was capitalized on by Wizards of the Coast who invited *Yu-Gi-Oh* players who had been qualified for high level competitive events to compete in *Magic Nationals*. This was issued as an extension to compete in competitive *Magic*, an event that was invite only, since the *Yu-Gi-Oh* equivalent had been canceled for that year.


The World Championship was broadcasted on ESPN2 in 1997, 1998 and 2000.


Overextended was the Invasion and forward, while Modern was 8th Edition and forward. This meant that Overextended included about two more years’ worth of cards than Modern.

In 2009 Ed Beard Jr., an artist whose work has been featured on Magic cards, sent letters to Wizards of the Coast and message boards where people would share and discuss card alterations. Beard was upset that people were altering cards that featured his art and felt that it violated his copyright when it was commissioned by Wizards. Beard called for legal action to stop card alterations. Beard also got into an argument with the altering community on the message board MTGSalvation over this matter and tried to have the site pulled down for aiding in illegal activity (violating copyright law). Despite Beard’s attempts, no legal action was taken against individual card alters or MTGSalvation.com. Since then card altering has not only continued but has grown within the community. It is still not official, neither endorsed nor condemned by Wizards or Hasbro in regards to legality. Wizards has only made statements in regards to card alterations about their tournament application and play, citing some guidelines and ultimately putting the decision about whether an alter card is playable in the hands of the head judge for the particular event. Amy Weber was another former Magic artist who spoke out against altering prior to Ed Beard Jr. Weber was mostly upset over the fact that the majority of the time when a card was altered the original artist’s name was painted over or covered up, removing the original artistic credit on the card. Despite Weber’s attempts, very little was done.

Tha Gatherin, a musical duo made up of Bill Boulden and Patrick Chapin. Released in the spring of 2010, the hip-hop album contained sixteen different tracks that covered different aspects and experiences of playing Magic.
CHAPTER IV. PLAYERS’ REACTIONS

To facilitate an understanding of how players interpret and interact with *Magic: the Gathering*, I collected responses through a short questionnaire. This questionnaire was composed to help gauge player reactions, thoughts, and beliefs about the game and their experiences with the community. The questionnaire also allows for some players to have a voice in expressing their opinions and experiences. These insights can provide valuable information that would be unobtainable by any other means.¹ It also prevents my point of view as a scholar from being the only one expressed. The responses provide some accounts of how integral the *Magic* community is to some people.

The survey was distributed during the latter part of October 2011 electronically through e-mail and Twitter, with the respondents sending their answers back to me via e-mail. The questionnaire was first distributed through e-mail to people I knew who were involved with the game and influential within the community. I presented myself to the respondents as a researcher interested in the *Magic* community and not necessarily as a player. I chose to keep my player status anonymous because I did not want it to influence my respondents’ potential answers. I felt that if the respondents knew I was a player their answers, explanations, and discussions would be biased.

One of the initial respondents, Gavin Verhey, was very interested in the questionnaire and expressed interest in helping distribute the questionnaire through some of his channels. I took Gavin up on his generous offer. He promoted the questionnaire through his Twitter feed and also acted as a liaison by forwarding the questionnaire to interested people or by putting people into direct contact with me. I am very grateful to Gavin for all of the time and assistance he willingly volunteered. I would not have had the high number of responses without his help.
stopped collecting responses by the second week of November 2011 and had a total of twenty-nine responses.

It is important to consider not only the size of my sample, twenty-nine, but also how the responses were collected. Even though the format in which I collected responses made it difficult to ask follow up questions, it allowed the respondents time to think, respond in detail, and share information that they might not have been comfortable sharing face to face. The people who had access to the questionnaire had to be visible enough throughout the community for their contact information to be available, or had to be following Gavin Verhey (or myself) on Twitter, or to be notified of the questionnaire by someone who had already been exposed to it. This means that my respondents have some degree of technological and/or social networking experience and are familiar at some level with the Magic community and interact digitally. It should not be ignored that some of the responses/results might be skewed due to who took the time to answer and respond, but also by those who had the ability to respond. This means that those who do not interact with their Magic fandom online are left out, as well as those who did not have access.

After I collected my data, there were a few things I wish I had done differently. At the time I felt that personal information, such as age and gender, was not necessary, but it could have provided some insight about my respondents. If I revisit this research in the future, I would make sure to also collect that information. Collecting responses through the internet generated a wide variety of answers, but it prevented me from knowing the specific demographics of my respondents. While this fact is not an inherent drawback, it is a limitation of the research. With all collected survey data there are issues with sample size, representation, and depth, which is why I find it necessary to be honest with the limitations. This is not an attempt to undermine the results, but to be up front with potential issues.
I want to explain the rationale behind the questions that I asked. The first question I asked (besides the person’s name) was if they were involved with Magic outside of just being players. This question was to see in what other areas my respondents were involved with the game, which implies a level of depth, as well as providing some rationale behind their answers (e.g. if they make money from Magic, judge, etc.). Next I asked how long they have been involved with Magic and how they first got involved with the game. This was to find out the length of time the respondent had been with the game and what got them interested in the first place. Next I asked if they were still involved with the game, to make sure that they are current players. Next I asked if they considered Magic to be more than just a game and if Magic had any influence in their life. These two questions were to find out how important Magic had been to them and also their opinion of Magic’s influences in their life. Next I asked with whom and where they normally play Magic. The last few questions focused on what the person felt was the best thing about Magic, if Magic had its own unique community, and who had more influence over the game, the players or the company. These questions were to see if the respondents recognized a Magic community and how they felt that community interacts with the company.

It is important to consider the context in which my responses were answered and collected. There was a bit of an upheaval occurring at the time of my questionnaire that contextualizes some of the responses. In Chapter Three I discussed the community backlash towards Wizards of the Coast over the announcement of Planeswalker Points and changes to the tournament aspect of Magic. My responses were collected during this time, before Wizards announced the modified changes. Some of my responses reflect players’ attitudes and opinions regarding these changes. This situation also influenced some of the respondents’ answers concerning the company’s or the community’s impact on the game.
By circulating the questionnaire through different channels, I was able to get responses from people with different experiences. The respondents included players, judges, writers, commentators, and people with experience working at Wizards on production of the game. I feel this provided enough different and varied experiences to provide a reliable conceptualization of the community. I will first break down the results quantitatively, describing trends and overall similarities I found among the responses. Then I will break down the results qualitatively, going over some of the detailed responses and their implications.

In my responses, twenty-three people had been involved with *Magic* for over eight years, with a few people having been involved for over fifteen years. There were also two people who had been with the game less than five years, two less than three years, and one who had only been involved roughly a year. In these responses, twenty-four people stated that they were involved with *Magic* outside of playing the game. This included writing about *Magic*, recording podcasts, judging *Magic* events, running a card store, trading/selling cards, and more. Two others stated they used to be involved with other parts of *Magic*, but were no longer.

According to the responses, the places people most frequently play *Magic* are game stores and card shops, with a total of twenty-three responses. This is not surprising considering these types of venues are the most common places to hold tournaments as well as to meet other players. The next common place to play was at someone’s home (eighteen respondents), whether it be their own house or a friend’s house. Nine people said they also play *Magic* at convention centers and only six stated that they play *Magic* digitally (which included *Magic Online* and other digital programs like *Magic Workstation*²). The most common answer to who people play *Magic* with was friends, with twenty-five responses. The next highest category was strangers, totaling nineteen. It is important to note that multiple people stated that often the strangers
eventually turned into friends or those strangers were just people they have yet to become friends with. The importance of friendship making and how it was facilitated through *Magic* was repeatedly emphasized. The third most common answer was family members (eight responses).

It is significant to note that all twenty-nine respondents stated that *Magic* had an effect on their lives and they found it to be more than just a game. For the majority of the respondents *Magic* has been a huge socializing agent and is responsible for many of their current or most valued friendships. It is not surprising that many responded that they usually played with friends and that these friendships are important in their lives. For others, *Magic* was helpful in developing skills that benefited them later on in life in occupations and other aspects of their lives. It is important to let these people’s experiences and words speak for themselves. This is just a small sample of some of the responses that are telling of how important this game has been in people’s lives. The majority of the following comments come from the people answering questions about how *Magic* has had an effect on their lives and whether *Magic* is more than just a game.

One respondent, Andrew, explained how important *Magic* has been to him by writing: “I would say [Magic] is as much a part of me as paint would be to an artist or lyrics to a musician. There is a large portion of my life dedicated to the game, and as I’ve mentioned before I have met a good amount of my friends through the game –including my partner. Without Magic, my life would certainly not be as rich or as full as it is.”³ *Magic* was a big socializing element for Andrew and even helped him meet his partner. Niki, another respondent, had a similar experience, stating “MTG is what brought my husband and I together. It also has let me socialize and meet the best friends I have now.”⁴ Other than just meeting significant others, respondents discussed how *Magic* led to personal growth. Joshua stated:
The game’s mechanics taught me important concepts of computer science, early and well. Learning to trade was a better immersion in economic theory than any Intro to Econ class ever created. Group play taught me lessons in game theory that I still mentally refer to. Selling a binder of cards bought me the computer on which I taught myself to program, and that led to a career. And the draw to play the game got me out of my bedroom and forced a socially-awkward and introverted kid out into the world.

Gavin stated:

Magic is more than just a game – it’s a way of life. It’s a way of thinking about things in different ways, a window into a fresh viewpoint for everyday life. It’s a way of meeting friends. It’s a way of travelling around the world. It’s a way of teaching yourself through a method no classroom can. To a select few, it’s a job. Magic is far more than just what you find inside the booster packs.

Gavin’s response hits on the multiple different influences Magic can have on a person. For him Magic is a mental framing device, a way of thinking. Magic alters his viewpoint on life, changing his perceptions and worldviews. Who Gavin is and how he thinks has been changed through Magic. Magic is also friendship, education, travel, and work. Gavin builds on this statement later, stating: “Aside from being my job, aside from my tournament success paying for all my college tuition, it has afforded me so many opportunities. I’ve met countless friends, traveled around the world to places I would have never been otherwise, became a figure in the community, and given me a place to showcase my writing like I wouldn’t have been able to otherwise.” Magic has been a way for him to travel the globe, pay for college and show off his writing.
Other respondents had similar experiences. Joey highlighted the important of friendship and the social aspects of *Magic* when he wrote: “Since the beginning our podcast in autumn 2009, I’ve become more and more active in the MTG community. Now, for the most part, it just feels like I’ve got a massive circle of friends. More and more, I’ve come to think of the game as a vehicle used to connect with people. The real value is in the connections.” He also emphasizes the importance of the community and the more that he gets involved, the more connections and friends he makes. Brando, a different respondent, stated:

> Inside the culture it’s sort of an Esperanto. If you know deck archetypes and you see what someone’s playing, you might gain insight about their life. Probe what they think of a card, and you see their thought processes. Magic is a game with constantly changing parameters; as such, it’s like a Rubik’s Cube where everything’s spinning. The allure is so great to solve the puzzle, but as soon as you solve it environments change and new cards are made. It is the ultimate in mental exercise, and those mental exercises can keep you going through difficult times in “real life”.

For Brando, *Magic* is an ever-changing mental puzzle that, while challenging, can help people escape from the difficulties in their lives. *Magic* also reflects personality traits and is a way for people to transcend boundaries and come together. For Adam, *Magic* is something that he has enjoyed so much that he wants to give back to the community. He wrote: “I’ve been playing Magic on and off for more than half of my life (I’m 24 currently.) It’s hands-down my favorite activity. It’s given me so much enjoyment over my life that I feel the desire to give back to the game in some way, whether that be by judging, or becoming a WotC employee.”

Jesse was more ambivalent towards the game, but felt that it had an irreversible effect on his life. He wrote:
Basically, I think it’s too late to cut my losses and leave. It’s dominated too much of my time, and occupies too much of my brainspace, to be able to abandon it and not constantly think about it in one way or another. That’s kind of a cop-out answer, though. I need something to think about when I’m not doing anything, and Magic is the best game I have found at giving the mind something to do when one isn’t playing.11

Even though his response is not a complete praise of the game, the mental escapism and exercise that *Magic* provides is something Jesse has not found anywhere else. *Magic* helps combat the boredom, while still being stimulating.

Aaron, discussing a more competitive approach to the game, discusses *Magic* as serious leisure. He states:

I have won thousands of dollars playing competitively, as well as compensation from writing for Magic related websites as well. Competitive Magic can be similar to a part time job. You do not always get paid for what seems like over time in the homework and preparation you do for events; however, when you do get a big paycheck, it is extremely gratifying. The overtime in work could be compared to a boxer or MAA fighter. Their preparation is daily in some sense as they need to balance the proper diet with constant physical training. For Magic, there are articles, podcasts, and discussion in general that goes up daily. The more work you log in, the better you will be trained for the big day. This is not to say that every waking moment is spent thinking about the game, but a reasonable amount of time per week in necessary to succeed.12

His response focuses on the competitive side of the game, more than many of the other respondents. What is important though is the discussion of the time and energy that goes into playing *Magic* competitively, and the financial benefits that are possible. While this focuses on a
competitive experience of the game, it still emphasizes communal practices of reading articles, listening to podcasts, and discussing the game. Aaron’s comment fits with Gavin’s comments about the possible benefits (travel and money) of playing Magic.

Anthony discusses more abstract idea of the community, recognizing that it is made up of more than players. “[I]t’s not just a card game, it’s a showcase of personalities, from the competitive players, to the art alters, to the brewers. Everyone is different, and that’s what makes the game great.” Anthony’s comment shows that the community is more complex than just competitive and casual players, but includes a wide swath of players, including those who alter cards (as discussed in Chapter Three). Lastly, Gavin summarizes how important Magic has been in his life. He wrote:

With many events in your life, you can trace the causality back to the point where your life changed course and imagine the “what if” situation of if you had gone the other way. I can do that with almost everything – except Magic. I completely cannot imagine my life without Magic. The game is such an integral part of me and who I am and I’m such a part of its world that I cannot imagine a life where I never encountered it. Even if the game went away tomorrow, the people I’ve met, things I’ve learned, and places I’ve been would last a lifetime. I’ve flown over 100,000 miles this year just for Magic. At 21, I’ve been to more places and touched more lives than some people will in their entire lifetime – all because of a game. That’s incredible.

Magic is one of the defining aspects of his life, one that he could not even image his life without. David expressed how influential Magic was in saving his life. He wrote: “it is something that prevented my own suicide, because every time I see them I realize how many friends I have and do not want to leave them behind. Also it has given me a decent supplement to my income since
I am an undergraduate without a job. Like for many others, Magic is a way for him to earn some income. The friendships created through the game are one of the things that have kept him going and Magic’s influence in his life could never be overstated.

These statements are deeply personal and powerful accounts about how Magic has been a fundamental aspect in these people’s lives. Their discussions hint at various aspects of the game and community as being important to these people. For some of them it is the social aspect; Magic is how they socialized and made their closest friends, as I discussed in Chapter Three. For others, Magic has been a space where they have been able to express their competitive sides, providing a place for stimulus and growth, as well as financial rewards. These two approaches are related to my previous discussion of the distinction between casual and competitive players in Chapter Two. For others, their experiences with Magic taught them important life lessons that helped them in the “real world” and in their everyday jobs. The responses were overwhelmingly positive towards Magic and many responders expressed the inability to consider their lives without ever experiencing Magic: the Gathering.

I also asked in the questionnaire which force they felt has the greatest influence over Magic: the players or the company. This was an attempt to get at the core of which part of the community these people perceive as most important, the official copyrighted control of Wizards and Hasbro or the players who experience, play, and interact with the game. Sixteen people responded that the players have more influence, with the other thirteen citing Wizards and Hasbro as having the ultimate authority. Yet, at least six of the respondents found answering the question difficult and had trouble actually deciding who ultimately had the greatest influence. They saw the company controlling the production of the game, but needing players interested in the game to stay in business. A handful of respondents found that the correlation between the
company and players was inseparable, but eventually concluded that one side had a slight advantage over the other.

Several respondents addressed the inter-relationship between the players and the company as well as the relationship between entertainment producers and consumers. One respondent, Mike, explained the relationship from the perspective of the company: “A company reacts to a stimulus. Often the magic community believes that the company wants to make them products to make them happy and are happy as well. A business is created to make money and by having happy players, you have more sales.”

Joey answered the question from the perspective of the players:

In truth, it’s a symbiotic relationship. One cannot exist without the other. The company (Wizards of the Coast) has a direct impact on objects we’re using and creates the atmosphere of each set. It is imperative that they craft a game that makes for an enjoyable experience for players…. But players that truly make up the full experience. Wizards of the Coast –like so many other companies who purpose is to create entertainment –merely facilitates the interactions between people.

Although they were divided as to whether the players or company had greater influence in shaping the community, most of the respondents described some form of symbiotic relationship between them. Jesse reiterated this relationship by stating:

The company makes the tools to play the game, but it’s up to the players to shape the experiences they want to have. Because there are so many formats to play (both those officially sanctioned by Wizards, those player-invented, and those somewhere in between), and the fact that all players can choose their level of competition, the game is almost entirely created by the community. Wizards just tries to make the experience
better…. Legal issues of IP aside, Wizards is probably more replaceable as the creators of Magic than the community is. If Wizards made terrible sets or terrible decisions, people would organize things themselves and continue playing as if nothing happened.18 For this respondent, while Wizards is in charge of the game, it is less important to the core of the game than the community. If Wizards were to falter, the community would continue on since it is what keeps the game going. Another respondent praised the perceived connectedness between the company and community by stating: “As a product it’s the company, but the current company is more in touch with the player base than for most products I’ve encountered.”19

There are major reasons why these people might have felt this way about the company. Many of the employees at Wizards are very interactive within the community and express deep concern about meeting players’ needs. Mark Rosewater, Aaron Forsythe, and other members of Magic R&D are very active on Twitter where they constantly interact with people, answer questions and discuss Magic. The majority of Magic R&D is made up of current and former players, allowing them to also participate within the community. These individuals tend to be very open in expressing their opinions to the public, constantly ask for feedback on people’s feelings, and gauge how the community is interacting with the game. This has helped create a sense that the community not only is very important to the game, but is constantly considered in the construction and production of the game. This relationship between company and community makes sense from a marketing perspective, since Wizards has a vested interest in creating products that people want and will readily consume. This symbiotic relationship allows for the community to contribute to the products that serve as the catalyst for the community, while at the same time allows the company to create products consumers want to buy and increase consumers’ desire for the product.
The proposed overhaul of the tournament system in 2011 created a large community backlash (discussed previously in Chapter Three). People did not hesitate to contact R&D members through e-mail and Twitter to express their opinions. And the members of R&D responded back, held multiple conversations in a quasi-public sphere, engaged with the upset community and repeatedly asked for continued feedback. Mark Rosewater tweeted, “The most important message tonight is that we value your input. We strive to make Magic the best game possible & if we drift, you tell us.” These discussions led to some of the policies being changed from the initially proposed new tournament structure. What resulted was a hybrid system that included some of the changes that the company had previously wanted to implement and some of the suggestions of the community and players.

From Wizards’ actions and policies, it is apparent that the Magic community is very important from a company standpoint. Yet, this does not mean that the players automatically feel the same way. While Magic has been important to the respondents and a very positive force in many of their lives, this does not equate with placing an importance or emphasis on the community. I also asked the respondents if they felt that the community was important to Magic and why they feel that way. Twenty-four stated that the community was significant to Magic, four were unsure about its role and one person felt the community was not essential. Nineteen felt that the Magic community was unique from other communities, five were unsure how unique it is, and five felt it was not unique at all.

This is what some of the respondents had to say about the importance of the community. For some respondents the community is central to their experience of the game. Brad stated: “The community. I love it. Without this community, I wouldn’t be playing anymore.” Brad later states “that community is very important, especially to itself, because without it a lot of
people wouldn’t continue playing (just like me!).” For him, the community is not only one of the best factors of Magic; it is the reason he is still a player. The community is something that keeps him involved with the game and he feels it is one of the biggest reasons anyone continues to stay with the game. For John, a writer for the Star City Games, the community grows out of the innate social aspects of the game. “Certainly it’s developed its own community. Magic is inherently a social game; it takes at least two to play. Considering that I am now a recognized writer and am planning on going on a weeklong cruise to Alaska with other Magic enthusiasts, the community is important to me.” John’s comment also refers to the Magic Cruise series, an open event where players can pay to spend days on a cruise ship with other Magic players. This event is not officially sanctioned by Wizards, but some Wizards employees do attend.

Dustin comments on how the community has been important to Magic’s growth. “The Magic community is both unique to the game and important to its growth. Magic has had tremendous success in the internet age when compared to other, non-electronic games. The community supports the players as individuals and in general. Magic gives an outlet to many people who would otherwise struggle to find a place to “fit in”.” His comment reinforces the notion that the community is not limited to face-to-face interactions and is facilitated through digital space. It also is supported by the discussion from Chapter Three about Magic’s success compared to other TCGs and how these games have provided a haven for many disenfranchised kids.

Chin Kai also felt that Magic’s community separated it from other trading card games. “I’d say that as far as I’m concerned, MtG has a special community which that of other games struggle to emulate. The longevity of the game itself guarantees a sizeable community. However, more than that, it’s the fact that MtG can appeal to people in a myriad of ways, the fact that each
mode of appeal itself is capable of generating a community; this is something which other card games have yet to achieve.” Magic’s community is not only unique, but is something that no other game has been able to replicate. For Niki, the community has been a way for her to meet other women who share her interests and make friends. She writes:

[T]here is a community unique to MTG that is very important. It lets people who are normally not good at socializing to be who they are and others around them understand them. Though females are rarer in the MTG world, the store I frequent has several regulars including myself. I tend to not get along with other females outside of the MTG community, but I do get along with the ones that do play since we have common ground [and] some of them have become really good friends.27

For Niki the community fosters the social elements of the game and helps facilitate friendships around a common interest.

Gavin also found the community to be really important to the game, stating: “The game is phenomenal and has incredible strategic complexity, don’t get me wrong. The community wouldn’t exist without the phenomenal game behind it. But the people and the culture is just so wonderful and like nothing else I’ve encountered on the planet.”28 Travis explains how Magic is different than other gaming communities and how that is positive. “The game would not be as important if it did not promote a ‘community’. I can play videogames online with my friends if I just want to ‘interact’. If I want to really have fun with them, we gather around a kitchen table and cast spells.”29 He emphasizes that friends coming together to play the game is a stronger way to interact than just through virtual space. Travis emphasizes the physical aspect of playing Magic around a kitchen table as actually having fun with friends, instead of just interacting.

Dave finds the Magic community to be very diverse, but filled with passionate participants. “I’ve
found the Magic community to be quite unique, at least in my experience. It’s very varied in age and experience, but you can always learn from others regardless. Part of what makes the community special is the passion that players have for the game. From friends at the kitchen table up to the pro circuit.”

Mads felt very similarly, finding the diversity of the community to be a good thing. “In my opinion, due to the pro tour and all the magic sites on the web, a very unique following has sprung up around Magic. The history and tales evoke a strange sort of camaraderie between the players, be they grinders or kitchen table enthusiasts.”

Overwhelmingly, the respondents found the Magic community not only special, but a defining aspect of the game. It is this strong community built around a game that got many of them involved in the first place and is the reason they continue to participate.

Yet, not everyone felt the community was significantly different from other games. Nichole stated: “I think you find the same community in any face to face social game. There is a definite bond that forms between gamers/ hobbyist that I don’t think is shared by other types of communities.” For her Magic did not have its own unique community, but the overall gaming subculture fostered communities unlike any other. John stated:

I wouldn’t necessarily say there is a very unique community that is MTG centric because there are many other hobbies that I find other MTG players know tons about and can relate to almost every other MTG player with (RPG video games, other board games like D&D, etc.) However, I will say that there is a certain language/lingo and traits that MTG players have that no other community has. I feel our community can be the most outspoken (whether good or bad). We tend to congregate and share information more than any other competitive gaming community out there, especially for a card game. I also feel the community has a certain level of respect and clout when it comes to those
that create the game as well. It’s because of things along with the integrity of the game and the social atmosphere that it creates that I feel if there is a very unique MTG community, it is just as important as any other out there.33

While this comment leaves space for the community to still be unique, there is hesitation to differentiate *Magic* from other games within the same subculture, or even other similar gaming subcultures. This is not surprising because there tends to be overlap within gaming subcultures and some blurring of the lines. Yet this respondent still found the *Magic* community to be very outspoken and willing to come together and share information, despite the potential for competitiveness. Lastly, the respondent feels the respect and integrity of the game and community are very essential and that the *Magic* community is as important as any other community.

Overall, I agree with the majority of the respondents that there is something special about the community that has evolved with *Magic* over the last two decades. This community has been a major influence in many players’ lives and still remains an important element. This is true for the people who participate in the game as well as companies who publish the game. With over twelve million people playing, interacting, consuming and enjoying *Magic* and related content it would be irrational to doubt the cultural influence. For many this cultural influence is not minor. For many people *Magic* has been a way to travel, to make money, to spend leisure time and ultimately make friends. This reverberates with the discussion in Chapter Three about the infrastructure providing a haven for these people, allowing for socializing that would have been difficult without *Magic*. Given all this discussion, it is hard to overstate the influential aspects of the game. Not only has *Magic* launched a lucrative gaming subculture; it has brought countless people together through shared experiences. The game has seen a huge increase in sales, players,
and attendance over the last few years and shows no signs of slowing down. It is safe to say that

*Magic* is not only culturally significant, but looks like it’s going to remain strong in the future.

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**NOTES**

2. Magic Workstation is not officially licensed by Wizards of the Coast and is completely free, unlike *Magic Online*.
3. Andrew Starr.
7. Gavin Verhey.
10. Adam Ford.
11. Jesse Mason.
12. Aaron Wilburn.
13. Anthony Lowry.
15. David Yee.
16. Mike Linnemann.
17. Joey Pasco.
18. Jesse Mason.
22. Brad Kirk.
25. Dustin Gilliland.
27. Niki Emiko Patterson.
28. Gavin Verhey.
29. Travis Hall.
30. Dave Astels.
31. Mads Thagaard.
32. Nichole Johnson.
33. John Smith.
CONCLUSION. PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Magic: The Gathering as a game, as well as the trading card game subculture as a whole, has been mostly overlooked by researchers. Trading card games represent a large cultural trend with continuous growth over the last two decades, so more work needs to be done in this area. Video games have expanded greatly as a focus for cultural studies, which has increased interest in the academic study of games in general. Yet, while new fields and areas of study have grown over the last few decades, they mostly focus on digital games. Non-digital games, including trading card games, have received little attention from academia. My thesis builds on and adds to the small amount of academic work done on Magic: The Gathering. Magic is a very dynamic game, with an almost twenty-year history, creating various potential aspects for study. This thesis focuses on two different concepts of the game: as part of a trading card game subculture and as a community built around the game of Magic.

Magic’s early success spawned the trading card game subculture. Using Gary Alan Fine’s theoretical approach, I have argued that trading card games, including Magic, make up an urban leisure subculture. Urban leisure subcultures focus on spaces connected with mass consumption, utilized as a form of entertainment, especially gaming. The trading card game subculture has been culturally influential over its almost-twenty-year existence. The subculture has provided spaces for young kids to make friends and feel like they belong. The subculture also helped push the Pokémon craze of the late 1990s and influenced the Poker boom of the early 2000s. The subculture is responsible for generating millions of dollars, selling millions of cards, and bringing people together to share countless hours playing games. Card games have been a leisure pastime around the world for centuries, and trading card games are a modern variation. As the
last two decades have shown, trading card games are resilient and popular, and they show no signs of disappearing anytime soon.

The other focus of this thesis is on *Magic*’s community. I argue that this community is crucial to *Magic*’s success and is one of the defining aspects of the game. While “community” can be a nebulous concept at times, I focus on an imagined notion of connectedness, based on shared interests and unrestricted by limitations of space and time, which results in a group of people who act in response to the imagined idea. I find all *Magic* players united through this global community, which is perpetuated through concepts like metagaming, as well as articles and online discussions about the game. I focus on a macro view of *Magic* and its community, instead of a micro view that focuses on smaller pockets of players or individual play circles.

In Cultural Studies there is contention among scholars as to whether fan communities are controlled by the fans or by the producers of the products on which the fandom is centered. I believe that *Magic* occupies a unique space on the continuum between audience/fan control and producer control and resolves this tension by emphasizing both the producer and consumer. The company that owns *Magic*, Wizards of the Coast, has a large influence and control over the community. I argue that the company’s extensive work cultivating an infrastructure for *Magic* is one of the factors leading to its success and popularity. This explains not only why *Magic* continues to be one of the most successful TCGs ever, but also the strong growth of the brand over the last few years. Yet I do not privilege corporate control, but also focus on the community’s own importance to the game. In the end I find that a symbiotic relationship best describes *Magic*. Wizards employees are willing to engage and discuss with players, ask for feedback, and create space for conversations about the game to allow those who consume the product to have some say in its production. The blending of official infrastructure and fan
practice helps create a vibrant and strong community. This was the impression that I got through my years of experience as a player and member of the community, as well as throughout researching the game. This notion was reinforced by my questionnaires, which revealed how other members of the community feel about its place within their lives and their identification of the game’s cultural merits.

*Magic* is a culturally important phenomenon, one that has captivated millions of people for two decades and continues to grow in popularity. I examined the growth of *Magic* over the last few years and how this is tied to the community building and player experience. It would be irresponsible to write about *Magic* and its cultural importance without citing its strong growth since 2010. I argue that one of the major reasons behind the game’s rampant growth and success is Wizards’ careful cultivation of a global *Magic* community. If a company can produce a copyrighted subculture that resonates so well with those who consume it, its product not only will be well received by this audience, but will also be economically successful. *Magic*’s popularity has made it one of Hasbro’s most consistent and profitable brands over the last few years.

I also discuss how the community and the game of *Magic* have influenced its participants. I used my experiences as a player, my questionnaire responses, and other scholars’ work written about players’ experiences to explore how people create meaning and value in their lives through the consumption of popular culture texts, in this case the game of *Magic*. Overall, I found that *Magic*’s community has been instrumental and influential in many players’ lives, provided a haven for those who felt marginalized, a space of expression, and fun. It has provided a means for social interaction, friendship making, and, for some, money making.
The respondents to my questionnaire were very eager to participate and discuss how Magic had been important in their lives. The importance of Magic to its participants is indicated by the high level of response to my questionnaire, including the detailed and personal information the respondents provided. The respondents shared with me the places they normally played Magic and who they played with. This revealed that while many players do play Magic with friends, they also play the game often with strangers, usually in tournaments. Many also stated that these strangers eventually became friends or viewed these people as potential friends, emphasizing the socializing aspects of the game. A few even said they met their significant others through Magic. Many play the game at their house or a friend’s house or meet up with friends to play at a local card shop. These common places of play also highlighted the importance of friendship for these players.

I also inquired about how important the game was to their lives and what they felt was the best overall thing about Magic. Many stated that their friendships, travels, and memories gained through the game were some of the best aspects. This reinforced earlier answers about who they played with, once again referencing that friends were one of the biggest reasons for playing the game. Others stated that Magic had been a source of identity creation or personal growth. They found themselves and a place to be accepted through the game and community. A few even stated that without Magic they could not imagine what their lives would like, feeling that the game was one of the few things that defined them. Others stated how Magic had helped them through their lives, provided a source of income, a way to cultivate mental skills that helped them get a job, or an escape from the dark things in their life.

This also relates to Magic’s community, with many respondents stating that the community helped foster these friendships and memories. I also asked the respondents their
opinions on the importance and uniqueness of the *Magic* community. The majority wrote that the community was very important and was one of the defining aspects of *Magic* and what drew them to or kept them with the game. Lastly, I asked which group was more important to the community: the producers of the game, Wizards of the Coast, or the community of players. The respondents were split on who had the ultimate control, with most citing that both played influential parts. Without a careful balance between the fans and producers, many of the respondents felt *Magic* would not be as successful or fun of a game.

To some, *Magic* is merely a card game. It is something to pass the time, stave off boredom. To others, it is a terrible waste of time. These approaches to the game are perfectly fine: not everyone has to, or will, like the game. One of the exciting aspects of studying popular culture is that where some feel disapproval or disinterest, others find great emotion and attachment. This thesis stresses the participatory side of culture, focusing on the important and interesting things people do with cultural products. If one thing is to be taken away from this thesis, it is this: for thousands of people, *Magic* is significantly more than cards. *Magic* is friends, friendships, a pastime, a hobby, a job, a community, a stress reliever, a stress inducer, excitement, identity, and fun. *Magic* matters.

NOTES

SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE

My name is Travis Limbert. I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University. You are invited to be in a research study on Magic: the Gathering, as part of my work on a master’s degree in the Department of Popular Culture. I am conducting a research study of how the trading card game Magic: the Gathering and the people who play the game create a community. I am conducting a study of people involved in the Magic community as part of this research. The purpose of this study is get insider perspectives and opinions to supplement my research that I would otherwise not be able to obtain.

This study will ask you to answer a few questions in as much detail and depth as you find necessary. I estimate that your participation will take approximately half hour to an hour to complete, depending on the length of time you take to answer each question. The anticipated risk for participating in this survey is no greater than those encountered in normal daily life. This study benefits my research as your input will assist one of the first academic and in-depth looks into Magic and its community. There will be no direct benefit to you as a participant for being part of this study. I will protect the confidentiality of you as a respondent and your responses throughout the study. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw your consent or stop participation in the research at any time without penalty. You may also choose to not answer every question. If you decide to participate and change your mind later, you may withdraw your consent and stop your participation without penalty or explanation. Deciding to participate or not in this study will not impact your relationship with Bowling Green State University. You must be 18 years or older to participate.

By completing this survey and submitting it you are indicating your consent to participate in the study. If you have further questions or concerns I can be contacted by e-mail at ltravis@bgsu.edu or by phone (419) 303-4034. You can also direct questions to my thesis committee chair Marilyn Motz by e-mail at mmotz@bgsu.edu or by phone (419) 372-7863. If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University's Human Subjects Review Board by e-mail at hsrb@bgsu.edu or by phone (419) 372-7716. Please note that e-mail is not 100% secure, so it is possible that someone intercepting your e-mail will gain knowledge of your interest in the study.

I would like to use your real name and position within my thesis if you are willing to be identified.

- If you are willing to be identified by name in my thesis, please mark this box. [ ]
- If you prefer your information to remain confidential, please mark this box. [ ]

If you choose to remain confidential, all your personal information will be kept private and only be viewable to my advisor and me. If your response is quoted and you did not waive consent, a pseudonym will be used.

When you have finished the survey please return it to me via e-mail at ltravis@bgsu.edu.
Questions:

What is your name? (Please only answer if you have agreed to be identified by name)

Are you involved with Magic: the Gathering other than as a player? If so, in what way?

How long have you been involved with Magic: the Gathering? (This includes playing, reading information online or in magazines, collecting, etc.)

How/Why did you first get involved with Magic: the Gathering?

Are you still involved? If yes, could you explain what is it about Magic: the Gathering that keeps you involved?

Would you consider Magic: the Gathering more than just a card game to you? If yes, how so?

How long on average per week would you say you spend playing, thinking, and/or interacting with something related to Magic: the Gathering?

Has Magic: the Gathering had an effect in your life? If so, how so?

How would you describe who you play Magic: the Gathering with? (friends, coworkers, family, strangers, etc.)

Where do you normally play Magic: the Gathering? (home, friend’s house, store, convention center, etc.)

What would you say is the best overall thing about Magic: the Gathering?

When designing new products, do you consider factors such as community and the player base? If so, could you provide some examples?

Why did you decided to get involved with making your own videos?

Why did you to decide to create a new format?

Would you say that there exists a community unique to Magic: the Gathering? If so, is that community important? Why?

Who would you say has the greatest influence over Magic: the Gathering, the players or the company? Why?
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October 20, 2011

TO: Travis Limbert
    POPC

FROM: Hillary Harms, Ph.D.
      HSRB Administrator

RE: HSRB Project No.: H12T048GE7

TITLE: The Magic of Community: Gathering of Card Players and Subcultural Expression

You have met the conditions for approval for your project involving human subjects. As of October 14, 2011, your project has been granted final approval by the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). This approval expires on September 27, 2012. You may proceed with subject recruitment and data collection.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is attached. Consistent with federal OHRP guidance to IRBs, the consent document(s) bearing the HSRB approval/expiration date stamp is the only valid version and you must use copies of the date-stamped document(s) in obtaining consent from research subjects.

You are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB and to use only approved forms. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, send a request for modifications to the HSRB via this office. Those changes must be approved by the HSRB prior to their implementation.

You have been approved to enroll 15 participants. If you want to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

Good luck with your work. Let me know if this office or the HSRB can be of assistance as your project proceeds.

Comments/Modifications:
Pleased add text equivalent to the HSRB approval/expiration date stamp to the “footer” area of the electronic consent form (see attached for specific text).

c: Dr. Marilyn Motz

Research Category: EXPEDITED #7