The Design Evolution of Magic: The Gathering

Richard Garfield

Context

I wrote the original Magic design notes shortly after Magic was published. I felt an urgency to document the development of Magic like I have seldom felt before—there were so many people and ideas and events woven around these years that I knew would quickly slip from memory. I was aware that over the following years my thoughts on what made a good trading card game, and the design principles of games had evolved, so when interest was shown in my original design notes it seemed like a good opportunity to try and add that decade of perspective to the original document. The updated version of this essay was first published in ***Game Design Workshop,*** *by Tracy Fullerton, Christopher Swain, and Steven Hoffman (published 2004, CMP Books). It is reprinted here with permission.*

The Game Design Process

Game Economies

Richard was teaching at Whitman College for his second year after completing his Ph.D. in Mathematics at the University of Pennsylvania, when his first game, Magic: The Gathering was published. The game was the first trading card game, which has since become an industry of its own. Since then he has published many other trading card games, as well as board and card games.

Thoughts from Richard Garfield, 10 Years Ago and Today

Magic: The Gathering is one of the most important and influential games of our time. It was an instant hit when it first appeared at the Gen Con game convention in 1993 and has grown steadily in popularity since. This is a special two-part look at the creation and development of the game as written by the designer, Richard Garfield. Richard wrote the first part "The Creation of Magic: The Gathering" nearly 10 years ago when the game was first released. In it he muses about the design challenges of a collectable trading card game and he recounts the game's fascinating playtest history. The second part "Magic Design: A Decade Later" is a retrospective on the original design notes. In it Richard provides insight about how and why the game has evolved the way it has—including thoughts on today's Magic Pro Tour, Magic Online, and the next ten years for the game.

The Creation of Magic: The Gathering—Notes from the Designer (written 1993)

The Ancestry of Magic

Games evolve. New ones take the most loved features of earlier games and add original characteristics. The creation of Magic: The Gathering is a case in point.

Though there are about a dozen games that have directly influenced Magic in one way or another, the game's most influential ancestor is a game for which I have no end of respect: Cosmic Encounter, originally published by Eon Products and re-released by Mayfair Games. In this game, participants play alien races striving to conquer a piece of the universe. Players can attempt their conquest alone, or forge alliances with other aliens. There are nearly fifty alien races which can be played, each of which has a unique ability: the Amoeba, for example, has the power to Ooze, giving it unlimited token movement; the Sniveler has the power to Whine, allowing it to automatically catch up when behind. The best thing about Cosmic Encounter is precisely this limitless variety. I have played hundreds of times and still can be surprised at the interactions different combinations of aliens produce. Cosmic Encounter remains enjoyable because it is constantly new.

Cosmic Encounter proved to be an interesting complement to my own design ideas. I had been mulling over a longtime idea of mine: a game that used a deck of cards whose

composition changed between rounds. During the course of the game, the players would add cards to and remove cards from the deck, so that when you played a new game it would have an entirely different card mix. I remembered playing marbles in elementary school, where each player had his own collection from which he would trade and compete. I was also curious about Strat-o-matic™ Baseball, in which participants draft, field, and compete their own teams of baseball players, whose abilities are based on real players' previous year statistics. Intrigued by the structure of the game, I was irritated that the subject was one for which I had no patience.

These thoughts were the essence of what eventually became Magic. My experiences with Cosmic Encounter and other games inspired me to create a card game in 1982 called Five Magics. Five Magics was an attempt to distill the modularity of Cosmic Encounter down to just a card game. The nature of Cosmic Encounter seemed entirely appropriate for a magical card game—wild and not entirely predictable, but not completely unknown, like a set of forces you almost, but don't quite, understand. Over the next few years, Five Magics went on to inspire entirely new magical card games among my friends.

Ten years later, I was still designing games, and Mike Davis and I had come up with a board game called RoboRally. Mike was acting as our agent, and among the companies he approached was a brand-new gaming company called Wizards of the Coast. Things seemed to be going well, so that August, Mike and I made our way to Portland, Oregon to meet over a pizza with Peter Adkison and James Hays of Wizards of the Coast.

Both Peter and James were very receptive to RoboRally, but informed me that they weren't really in a position to come out with a board game right away. This wasn't what I had come out to hear, of course, but I didn't want the trip to be a total waste. I asked Peter what he would be interested in. Peter replied that he really saw a need for a game that could be played quickly with minimal equipment, a game that would go over well at conventions. Could I do it?

Within a few days, the initial concept for a trading card game was born, based on another card game I had developed in 1985 called Safecracker. It hadn't been one of my best games. But then I remembered Five Magics.

The First Designs

I went back to graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania, and worked on the card game in whatever spare time I had. It wasn't easy; there were three months of false starts on

the project, there are so many aspects of card game design that have to be reconsidered when designing trading card games. First of all, you can't have any bad cards—people wouldn't play with them. In fact, you want to prevent too much range in the utility of cards because players will only play with the best—why make cards people won't play with? Besides, homogeneity of card power is the only way to combat the "rich kid syndrome" that threatened the game concept from the start. What was to keep someone from going out and getting ten decks and becoming unbeatable?

It was a major design concern. I had numerous theories on how to prevent purchasing power from unbalancing the game, none of which were entirely valid but all of which had a grain of truth. The most compelling counter to this "buy-out-the-store" strategy was the ante. If we were playing for ante, the argument ran, and your deck was the distilled fruit of ten decks, when I did win, I would win a more valuable card. Also, if the game had enough skill, then the player purchasing their power would surely be easy prey for the players dueling and trading their way to a good deck. And of course there was the sentiment that buying a lot of poker chips doesn't make you a winner. In the end, however, the "rich kid syndrome" became less of a concern. Magic is a fun game, and it doesn't really matter how you get your deck. Playtesting showed that a deck that is too powerful defeats itself. On the one hand, people stopped playing against it for ante unless a handicap was invoked; on the other, it inspired them to assemble more effective decks in response.

The first Magic release was affectionately named Alpha. It consisted of 120 cards split randomly between two players. The two players would ante a card, fight a duel over the ante, and repeat until they got bored. They often took a long time to get bored; even then, Magic was a surprisingly addictive game. About ten o'clock one evening, Barry "Bit" Reich and I started a game in the University of Pennsylvania Astronomy lounge, a windowless, air-conditioned room. We played continuously until about 3:00am—at least that's what we thought, until we left the building and found that the sun had risen.

I knew then that I had a game structure that could support the concept of individually owned and tailored decks. The game was quick, and while it had bluffing and strategy, it didn't seem to get bogged down with too much calculation. The various combinations that came up were enjoyable and often surprising. At the same time, the variety of card combinations didn't unbalance the game: when a person started to win, it didn't turn into a landslide.

From Alpha to Gamma

Except for the card mix, little has changed about Magic since Alpha. In Alpha, walls could attack, and losing all your lands of a particular color destroyed the associated spells in play, but otherwise, the rules are much the same now as they were in the early stages of playtesting.

Moving from Alpha to the Beta version was like releasing a wild animal. The enjoyable game that was Alpha now burst the confines of the duel to invade the lives of the participants. Players were free to trade cards between games and hunt down weaker players to challenge them to duels, while gamely facing or cravenly avoiding those who were more powerful. Reputations were forged—reputations built on anything from consistently strong play to a few lucky wins to good bluffing. The players didn't know the card mix, so they learned to stay on their toes during duels. Even the most alert players would occasionally meet with nasty surprises. This constant discovery of unknown realms in an uncharted world gave the game a feeling of infinite size and possibility.

For the Gamma version, new cards were added and many of the creature costs were increased. We also doubled the pool of playtesters, adding in a group with Strat-o-matic Baseball experience. We were particularly anxious to find out if Magic could be adapted for league play. Gamma was also the first version, which was fully illustrated. Skaff Elias was my art director: he and others spent days poring over old graphic magazines, comic books, and game books searching for art for the cards. These playtest decks were pretty attractive for crummy black-and-white cardstock photocopies. For the most part, the cards were illustrated with serious pictures, but there were a lot of humorous ones as well. Heal was illustrated by Skaff's foot. Power Sink showed Calvin (of "Calvin and Hobbes") in a toilet; after all, what is a toilet but a power sink? Berserk was John Travolta dancing in Saturday Night Fever. Righteousness pictured Captain Kirk, and Blessing showed Spock doing his "live long and prosper" gesture. An old comic book provided a Charles Atlas picture for Holy Strength, and a 98-pound weakling getting sand kicked in his face for Weakness. Instill Energy was Richard Simmons. The infamous Glasses of Urza were some X-ray glasses we found in a catalog. Ruthy Kantorovitz constructed a darling flame-belching baby for Firebreathing. I myself had the honor of being the Goblins. The pictures and additional players greatly added to the game atmosphere. It became clear that while the duels were for two players, the more players playing, the better the game was. In some sense, the individual duels were a part of a single, larger game.

Striking the Balance

Each playtest set saw the expulsion of certain cards. One type of card that was common in Alpha and Beta was rare in Gamma, and is now nonexistent: the type that made one of your rival's cards yours. Yes, Control Magic used to permanently steal a creature from your opponent. Similarly, Steal Artifact really took an artifact. Copper Tablet no longer even remotely resembles its original purpose, which was to swap two creatures in play. ("Yes, I'll swap my Merfolk for your Dragon. On second thought, make that my Goblins—they're uglier.") There was a spell, Planeshift, which stole a land, and Ecoshift, which collected all the lands, shuffled them and re-dealt them—really nice for the user of four or five colors of magic. Pixies used to be a real pain—if they hit you, you swapped a random card from your hand with your opponent. These cards added something to the game, often in the form of players trying to destroy their own creatures before their opponents took them for good, or even trying to take their own lives to preserve the last shreds of their decks. However, in the end it was pretty clear that the nastiness this added to the game environment wasn't worth the trouble, and no card should ever be at risk unless players choose to play for ante.

It was around this time that I began to realize that some players would oppose almost any decision made about the game, often vehemently. The huge amount of dissent about what should and should not be part of the card mix has led players to make their own versions for playtesting—a significant task that involves designing, constructing, shuffling, and distributing about 4000 cards. Each of these games had its merits, and the playtesters enjoyed discovering the quirks and secrets of each new environment. The results of these efforts will form the basis of future Deckmaster games that use the structure of The Gathering, while containing mostly new cards.

To Build a Better Deck

Playtesting a Deckmaster game is difficult. Probably the only games harder to playtest are elaborate, multi-player computer games. After developing a basic framework for Magic that seemed fairly robust, we had to decide which of the huge selection of cards to include, and with what relative frequencies. Common cards had to be simple, but not necessarily less powerful, than rare cards—if only rare cards were powerful, players would either have to be rich or lucky to get a decent deck. Sometimes a card was made rare because it was too powerful or imbalancing in large quantities, but more often, rare cards were cards that were intricate or specialized—spells you wouldn't want many of anyway. But these design guidelines only

got us so far. The whole game's flavor could change if a handful of seemingly innocent cards were eliminated, or even made less or more common. When it came down to actually deciding what to include and what to do without, I began to feel like a chef obliged to cook a dish for 10,000 people using 300 ingredients.

One thing I knew I wanted to see in the game was a player using multicolor decks. It was clear that a player could avoid a lot of problems by stripping down to a single color. For this reason, many spells were included that paralyzed entire colors, like Karma, Elemental Blast, and the Circles of Protection. The original plan was to include cards that thwarted every obvious simple strategy, and, in time, to add new cards which would defeat the most current ploys and keep the strategic environment dynamic. For example, it was obvious that relying on too many big creatures made a player particularly vulnerable to the Meekstone, and a deck laden with Fireballs and requiring lots of mana could be brought down with Manabarbs. Unfortunately, this strategy and counter-strategy design led to players developing narrow decks and refusing to play people who used cards that could defeat them flat out. If players weren't compelled to play a variety of players and could choose their opponent every time, a narrow deck was pretty powerful.

Therefore, another, less heavy-handed way to encourage variety was developed. We made it more difficult to get all the features a player needs in a deck by playing a single color. Gamma, for example, suffered from the fact that blue magic could stand alone. It was easily the most powerful magic, having two extremely insidious common spells (Ancestral Memory and Time Walk), both of which have been made rare. It had awesome counterspell capabilities. It had amazing creatures, two of the best of which are now uncommon.

Blue magic now retains its counterspell capability, but is very creature poor, and lacks a good way to do direct damage. Red magic has little defense, particularly in the air, but has amazing direct damage and destruction capability. Green magic has an abundance of creatures and mana, but not much more. Black is the master of anti-creature magic and has some flexibility, but is poorly suited to stopping non-creature threats. White magic is the magic of protection, and the only magic with common banding, but has little damage-dealing capability.

Sometimes seemingly innocuous cards would combine into something truly frightening. A good part of playtest effort was devoted to routing out the cards that contributed to so-called "degenerate" decks—the narrow, powerful decks that are difficult to beat and often

boring to play with or against. Without a doubt, the most striking was Tom Fontaine's "Deck of Sooner-Than-Instant Death," which was renowned for being able to field upwards of eight large creatures on the second or third turn. In the first Magic tournament, Dave "Hurricane" Pettey walked to victory with his "Land Destruction Deck." (Dave also designed a deck of Spectres, Mindtwists, and Disrupting Sceptres that was so gruesome I don't think anyone was ever really willing to play it.) Skaff's deck, "The Great White Death," could outlive just about anything put up against it. Charlie Catin's "Weenie Madness" was fairly effective at swamping the opponent with little creatures. Though this deck was probably not in the high-win bracket of the previous decks, it was recognized that, playing for ante, Charlie could hardly lose. Even winning only one in four of his games—and he could usually do better than that—the card he won could be traded back for the island and the two Merfolk he lost, with something extra thrown in.

In the end I decided that the degenerate decks were actually part of the fun. People would assemble them, play with them until they got bored or their regular opponents refused to play against them, and then retire the deck or trade off its components for something new—a Magic version of putting the champion out to stud. Most players ended up treating their degenerate decks much like roleplayers treat their most successful characters: they were relegated to the background, to be occasionally dusted off for a new encounter.

After the pursuit of sheer power died down, another type of deck developed: the Weird Theme deck. These decks were usually made to be as formidable as possible within the constraints of their theme. When Bit grew bored of his "Serpent Deck" (he had a predilection for flopping a rubber snake on the playing surface and going "SsssSssSs" whenever he summoned a Serpent), he developed his "Artifact Deck," which consisted of artifacts only—no land. It was fun to see the "Artifact Deck" go up against someone who used Nevinyrral's Disk. But the king of weird decks was, without a doubt, Charlie Catin. In one league, he put together a deck that I call "The Infinite Recursion Deck." The idea was to set up a situation where his opponent couldn't attack him until Charlie could play Swords to Plowshares on a creature. Then he would play Timetwister, causing the cards in play to be shuffled with the graveyard, hand, and library to form a fresh library. Swords to Plowshares actually removes a creature from the game, so his rival has one less creature. Repeat. After enough iterations, his rival was bloated with life given by the Swords to Plowshares, having maybe 60 life points, but there were no creatures left in his deck. So Charlie's Elves started in—59 life, 58 life, 57

life—and the curtain closes on this sad game. I still can't think about this deck without moist emotional snorts. The coup de grace is that this league required players to compete their decks ten times. And, since his games often lasted over an hour and a half, he received at least one concession.

Words, Words, Words

It was not just determining the right card mix that players and designers found challenging. This becomes increasingly clear to me as I participate in the never-ending process of editing the rules and the cards. As my earliest playtesters have pointed out (in their more malicious moods), the original concept for Magic was the simplest game in the world because you had all the rules on the cards. That notion is long gone.

To those who didn't have to endure it, our struggle for precision was actually rather amusing. My own rules discussions about card wordings were mostly with Jim Lin, who is the closest thing you will ever encounter to a combination rules lawyer and firehose. A typical rule-problem session would go:

> Jim: *"Hmm—there seems to be a problem with this card. Here is my seven-page rules addition to solve the problem."*
>
> Richard: *"I would sooner recall all the cards than use that. Let's try this solution instead."*
>
> Jim: *"Hmm—we have another problem."*
>
> [Repeat until...]
>
> Richard: *"This is silly—only incredibly stupid and terminally anal people could possibly misinterpret this card."*
>
> Jim: *"Yes, maybe we have been thinking about this too long. If you're playing with that kind of person, you should find some new friends."*

A specific example of something we actually worried about is whether Consecrate Land would really protect your land from Stone Rain. After all, the first says it prevents land from being destroyed and the second says it destroys the land. Isn't that a contradiction? It still hurts my head getting into a frame of mind where that is confusing. It is perhaps a little like wondering why anyone would give you anything for money, which is, after all, just paper.

But, then again, I could never tell what was going to confuse people. One of the playtesters, Mikhail Chkhenkeli, approached me and said, "I like my deck. I have the most

powerful card in the game. When I play it, I win on the next turn." I tried to figure out what this could be; I couldn't think of anything that would win the game with any assurance the turn after casting. I asked him about it and he showed me a card that would make his opponent skip a turn. I was confused until I read exactly what was written: "Opponent loses next turn." It was my first real lesson in how difficult it was going to be to word the cards so that no two people would interpret the same card in a different way.

The Magic Marketplace

Another thing I realized in the second year of playtesting really surprised me. Magic turned out to be one of the best economic simulations I had ever seen. We had a free-market economy and all of the ingredients for interesting dynamics. People valued different cards in different ways—sometimes because they simply weren't evaluating accurately, but much more often because the cards really have different value to different players. For example, the value of a powerful green spell was lower for a person who specializes in black and red magic than for one who was building a deck that was primarily green. This gives a lot of opportunity for arbitrage. I would frequently find cards that one group of players wasn't using but another group were treating like chunks of gold. If I was fast enough, I could altruistically benefit both parties and only have to suffer a little profit in the process.

Sometimes the value of a card would fluctuate based on a new use (or even a suspected new use). For example, when Charlie was collecting all the available spells that produced black mana, we began to get concerned—those cards were demanding higher and higher prices, and people began to fear what he could need all that black mana for. And, prior to Dave's "Land Destruction Deck," land destruction spells like Stone Rain and Ice Storm were not high-demand spells. This of course allowed him to assemble the deck cheaply, and after winning the first Magic tournament, sell off the pieces for a mint.

Trade embargoes appeared. At one point a powerful faction of players would not trade with Skaff, or anyone who traded with Skaff. I actually heard conversations such as:

> Player 1 to Player 2: *"I'll trade you card A for card B."*
>
> Skaff, watching: *"That's a moronic trade. I'll give you card B and cards C, D, E and F for card A."*
>
> Players 1 and 2 together: *"We are not trading with you, Skaff."*

Another interesting economic event would occur when people would snatch up cards they had no intention of using. They would take them to remove them from the card pool, either because the card annoyed them (Chaos Orb, for example) or because it was too deadly against their particular decks.

I think my favorite profit was turned during an encounter with Ethan Lewis and Bit. Ethan had just received a pack of cards and Bit was interested in trading with Ethan. Bit noticed that Ethan had the Jayemdae Tome, began to drool, and made an offer for it. I looked at the offer and thought it was far too low, so I put the same thing on the table.

Bit looked at me and said, "You can't offer that! If you want the Tome you have to bid higher than my bid."

I said, "This isn't an offer for the Tome. This is a gift for Ethan deigning to even discuss trading the Tome with me."

Bit looked at me in disbelief, and then took me aside. He whispered, "Look, I'll give you this wad of cards if you just leave the room for ten minutes." I took his bribe, and he bought the Tome. It was just as well—he had a lot more buying power than I did. In retrospect, it was probably a dangerous ploy to use against Bit—after all, he was the person who was responsible for gluing poor Charlie's deck together once, washing a different deck of Charlie's in soap and water, and putting more cards of Charlie's in the blender and hitting frappé.

Probably the most constant card-evaluation difference I had with anyone was over Lord of the Pit. I received it in just about every playtest release we had, and it was certainly hard to use. I didn't agree with Skaff, though, that the only value of the card was that you might get your opponent to play with it. He maintained that blank cards would be better to play with because blank cards probably wouldn't hurt you. I argued that if you knew what you were doing, you could profit from it.

Skaff asked me to cite a single case where it had saved me. I thought a bit and recalled the most flamboyant victory I had with it. My opponent knew he had me where he wanted me—he had something doing damage to me, and a Clone in hand, so even if I cast something to turn the tide, he would be able to match me. Well, of course, the next cast spell was a Lord of the Pit; he could Clone it or die from it, so he Cloned it. Then each time he attacked, I would heal both of the Lords, or cast Fog and nullify the assault, and refuse to attack. Eventually, he ran out of creatures to keep his Lord of the Pit sated and died a horrible death.

Skaff was highly amused by this story. He said, "So, when asked about a time the Lord of the Pit saved you, you can only think of a case where you were playing somebody stupid enough to clone it!"

Dominia and the Role of Roleplaying

Selecting a card mix that accommodated different evaluations of the cards wasn't enough; we also had to develop an environment in which the cards could reasonably interact. Establishing the right setting for Magic proved to be a central design challenge. In fact, many of our design problems stemmed from an attempt to define the physics of a magical world in which duels take place and from building the cards around that, rather than letting the game define the physics. I was worried about the cards' relationship to each other—I wanted them to seem part of a unified setting, but I didn't want to restrict the creativity of the designers or to create all the cards myself. Everyone trying to jointly build a single fantasy world seemed difficult, because it would inevitably lack cohesion. I preferred the idea of a multiverse, a system of worlds that was incredibly large and permitted strange interactions between the universes in it. In this way, we could capture the otherworldly aspects of fantasy that add such flavor to the game while preserving a coherent, playable game structure. Almost any card or concept would fit into a multiverse. Also, it would not be difficult to accommodate an ever-growing and diverse card pool—expansion sets with very different flavors could be used in the same game, for they could be seen as a creative mingling of elements from different universes. So I developed the idea of Dominia, an infinite system of planes through which wizards travel in search of resources to fuel their magic.

In its structured flexibility, this game environment is much like a roleplaying world. I don't mean to suggest that this setting makes Magic a roleplaying game—far from it—but Magic is closer to roleplaying than any other card or board game I know of. I have always been singularly unimpressed by games that presumed to call themselves a cross between the two because roleplaying has too many characteristics that can't be captured in a different format. In fact, in its restricted forms—as a tournament game or league game, for example—Magic has little in common with roleplaying. In those cases, it is a game in the traditional sense, with each player striving to achieve victory according to some finite set of rules. However, the more free-form game—dueling with friends using decks constructed at whim—embodies some interesting elements of roleplaying.

Each player's deck is like a character. It has its own personality and quirks. These decks often even get their own names: "The Bruise," "The Reanimator," "Weenie Madness," "Sooner-Than-Instant Death," "Walk Into This Deck," "The Great White Leftovers," "Backyard Barbeque," and "Gilligan's Island," to name a few. In one deck I maintained, each of the creatures had a name—one small advantage to crummy photocopied cardstock is the ease of writing on cards. The deck was called "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves," containing a Wurm named Snow White and seven Mammoths: Doc, Grumpy, Sneezy, Dopey, Happy, Bashful, and Sleepy. After a while I got a few additional Mammoths, which I named Cheesy and Hungry. There was even a Prince Charming: my Veteran Bodyguard.

As in roleplaying, largely the players determine the object of the game in the unstructured mode of play. The object of the duel is usually to win, but the means to that end can vary tremendously. Most players find that the duel itself quickly becomes a fairly minor part of the game compared to trading and assembling decks.

Another characteristic of Magic, which is reminiscent of roleplaying, is the way players are exploring a world rather than knowing all the details to start. I view Magic as a vast game played among all the people who buy decks, rather than just a series of little duels. It is a game for tens of thousands in which the designer acts as a gamemaster. The gamemaster decides what the environment will be, and the players explore that environment. This is why there are no marketed lists of cards when the cards are first sold: discovering the cards and what they do is an integral part of the game.

And like a roleplaying game, the players contribute as much to an exciting adventure as the gamemaster. To all the supporters of Magic, and especially to my playtesters, I am extraordinarily grateful. Without them, if this product existed at all, it would certainly be inferior. Every one of them left a mark, if not on the game itself, then in the game's lore. Any players today that have even a tenth of the fun I had playing the test versions with them will be amply pleased with Magic.

Magic Design: A Decade Later (written 2003)

Magic and the trading card game industry have undergone a lot of changes since the time I wrote those design notes. In the meantime Magic has grown stronger with each successive year—as the game itself is improved, and more people are brought into trading card games from products such as Pokemon and Yu-Gi-Oh.

It is difficult for people these days to appreciate how little we knew about the game design space we were entering in the early nineties. My design notes failed to mention what in my mind is the strongest sign of that—after describing the concept of a trading card game to Peter Adkison I concluded with the cautious statement "of course, such a game may not be possible to design." It is hard for me to imagine that state of mind today, in a world where trading card games have reached every corner and are a part of almost every major entertainment property. This is a world where trading card games have left their mark on all areas of game design, from computer games to board games; and where trading card games have directly inspired games ranging from trading miniature games to trading tops games. This is a world where Jason Fox, from the comic strip Foxtrot, complained that a deck of cards coming with only 4 aces was some sort of ploy to get people to buy expansion kits.

That could be left as the end of the story; Magic was designed—as the design notes of a decade ago portray—and 10 years later it was still going strong. But this leaves out a large part of the story, since Magic was anything but a static game since then. The changes and improvements to Magic warrant design notes of their own.

First and Foremost: a Game

One thing that may look arcane in my notes to people, who know something about the game market, is my reference to the form of game that Magic launched as a "trading card game", rather than a "collectable card game". I still use TCG rather than CCG, which became the industry standard despite my efforts from its earliest days. I prefer "trading" rather than "collectable" because I feel it emphasizes the playing aspect rather than the speculation aspect of the game. The mindset of making collectables runs against that of making games—if you succeed in the collectable department then there is a tendency to keep new players out and to drive old ones away because of escalating prices. One of the major battles that Magic fought was to make it perceived principally as a game and secondarily as a collectable. Good games last forever—collectables come and go.

This was not merely theoretical speculation—Magic's immense success as a collectable was severely threatening the entire game. Booster packs intended to be sold at a few bucks were marked up to 20 dollars in some places as soon as they hit the shelves. While many people view this time as the golden age of Magic the designers knew that it was the death of the game in the long run. Who is going to get into the game when it was immediately inflated in price so much? How many people would play the game if doing so was wearing

holes in some of their most valuable assets? We might be able to keep a speculation bubble going for a while, but the only way Magic was going to be a long term success—a classic game—was for it to stand on its game play merits, not on its worthiness as an investment.

During "Fallen Empires", the fifth Magic expansion, we finally produced enough cards that the speculative market collapsed. The long-term value of Magic could perhaps thrive—but it wouldn't immediately price itself out of the reach of new players before they got a chance to try it. There was an inevitable negative patina that Magic got for a while, and "Fallen Empires" still has, but from this point on Magic was sinking or swimming on its game merits. Fortunately, Magic turned out to be a strong swimmer.

Binding the Unbounded

The part of my notes, which I believe, reveals my biggest change in thinking over the last decade is the statement that in the future we would publish other games with mechanics similar to Magic. What I was referring to is what became "Ice Age" and "Mirage", two expansions for Magic. Why did I think these would be entirely new games, rather than what they ended up being—expansions for the main game?

We all realized from the start that we couldn't just keep adding cards to Magic and expect it to stay popular. One reason for that is that each successive set of cards was a smaller and smaller percentage of the entire pool of cards, and so would necessarily have less and less impact on the whole of the game. This was illustrated vividly by players of "Ice Age" talking about how the entire set introduced two relevant cards to the game. One can imagine how the designers felt—working for years to make "Ice Age" a compelling game to have it boil down to a mere two cards. Another, perhaps more important reason, is that new players wouldn't want to enter a game where they were thousands of cards behind, so our audience would inevitably erode.

Initially we saw two solutions to this problem:

Make cards ever more powerful. This is a route many trading card game makers followed—and one I greatly dislike. It feels like strong-arming the players to buy more and more rather than really providing them more game value. But it would bring new players in, because they wouldn't need the obsolete old cards.

Eventually conclude Magic: The Gathering, and start a new game—Magic: Ice Age, for example. I advocated this approach, because I believed we could make exciting new game environments indefinitely. When one set was finished, players wouldn't be forced to buy into the

new game to keep competitive, they could move on if they wanted a change—and new players could begin on equal footing.

When it actually came time to do "Ice Age" it was absolutely clear that players would not stand for a new version of Magic, we had to think of something else. Additionally, we were also worried that fragmenting the player audience was a bad idea; if we made a lot of different games, people would have a harder and harder time finding players.

The solution we found was to promote different formats of game play—many of which involved only more recent sets of cards. Today there are popular formats of play which involve only the most recently published cards, cards published in the last 2 years, and cards published in the last 5 years, in addition to many others. While this does fragment the player base—since you may not be able to find players who play your format—it is less draconian than different games since you can apply your cards to many different formats over time. This was a far more flexible approach than the first—as it didn't command players to start fresh—it allowed them to, and allowed new players to join the game without being overwhelmed.

Trading Card Games Are not Board Games

I used to believe that trading card games were far more like board games than they are. This is not surprising, since I had no trading card games before Magic to draw examples from, and so was forced to use the existing world of games to guide my thinking on TCGs. A lot of my design attitudes grew from this misconception. For example, my second trading card game was designed to be best with 4 or more people, and took several hours to play. These are not bad parameters for a board game, but trading card games really want to be much shorter—because so much of the game is about replaying with a modified, or entirely new deck.

In a similar vein I used what I saw board game standards to be when it came to rules clarifications. It was common in board games to find a different group played a slightly different way, or had house rules to suit their tastes. With board games different interpretations of the rules and ways of play were not a major problem because players tended to play with fairly isolated groups. This led me to be quite anti-authoritarian when it came to the "correct" way to play. It turned out that a universal standard for a trading card game was far more necessary than a board game, because the nature of the game form made the interconnectivity of the game audience was far greater.

This meant that we had to take more and more responsibility for defining the rules and standards of play. In some ways this is analogous to being forced to construct the tourna-

ment rules for a game. The rules to Bridge are not that complex but when you write out the official tournament rules—really try to cross the t's and dot the i's—you have a compendium.

I had also hoped that players could moderate their own deck restrictions. We knew that certain card combinations were fun to discover and surprise someone with, but not fun to play with on an ongoing basis. So we figured players would make house rules to cover those decks and the responsible cards. The highly interconnected nature of Magic made it unreasonable to expect that, however, since every playgroup came up with a vast number of restrictions and rules, and they all played with each other. This meant we had to take more responsibility in designing the cards and when necessary, banning cards that were making the game worse.

The Pro Tour

All this precision invested in the design of the rules and cards made Magic a surprisingly good game to play seriously. We began to entertain ideas of really supporting a tournament structure with big money behind it—big enough players could, if good enough—make a living off of playing Magic. This was a controversial subject at Wizards of the Coast for a while—the worry being that making the game too serious would make it less fun. I subscribed fully to the concept of a Pro Tour—thinking of how the NBA helped make basketball popular and didn't keep the game from being played casually as well.

The Pro Tour had an almost immediate effect. Our players rapidly became much better as the top level ones devoted time to really analyzing the game and as that game tech filtered down through the ranks. Before the Pro Tour I am confident that I was one of the best players in the world, now I am mediocre at best.

Now there are thousands of tournaments each week, and many players have earned a lot of money playing Magic, some in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. At the last World Championship there were 56 countries competing. There is a never-ending buzz of Magic analysis and play as players attempt to master the ever-changing strategic ground of Magic. I believe this is a major part of Magic's ongoing popularity. If even a small group of people takes a good game very seriously, there can be far reaching effects.

Magic Online

Online Magic didn't come into its own until last year. For a long time I have wanted to see an online version of Magic that duplicated real life Magic as closely as possible. That is, the

online game would connect people, run the games and the tournaments, and adjudicate rules—but little else. At first we tried to form partnerships with computer game companies to do this—but our partners always had other ideas about how to do computer Magic. Eventually we hired a programming studio to do it our way and now we have Magic Online.

One of the striking things about Magic Online is that we use the same revenue model as in real life. Despite exhortations to use a subscription model, we chose to sell virtual cards, which you could trade with other players online. This allows players to buy some cards and then play them indefinitely with no further fee—as in real life.

It was important to us that we not make it a better deal playing online than off—we wanted it to be the same. That is because we feel the paper game contributes a lot to Magic's ongoing popularity, and it could be threatened if many of its players go to the online game.

For this reason one of the prime targets for the online game was going to be lapsed players. Many studies had been done on how long people play Magic and why they leave the game, and for the most part they didn't leave because they were bored with the game, they left because they had life changes which made it more difficult to play—for example getting jobs or having kids. These players would potentially rejoin the game if they could play from their own home on their own hours.

Magic Online is still a bit too young to be sure about—but it appears to have acquired a dedicated sizeable audience of players without hurting the paper game. Many of the players are formerly lapsed players as we had hoped.

The Next 10 Years

Who knows what the next decade will bring? Ten years ago I had no clue at all, it was an exciting time and we were riding a roller coaster. Now I am more confident—I believe that Magic is fairly stable, and that there is every reason to believe that it will be around and as strong in another 10 years. At this point it is clear that Magic is not a fad, and as many new players are coming in each year as are leaving the game.

Certainly Magic has stayed fresh for me. I get into the game every few months; joining a league, constructing a deck, or perhaps preparing for and participating in a tournament. Every time I return I find the game fresh and exciting, with enough different from the previous time to keep me on my toes, but enough the same that I can still exploit my modest skills at the game. I look forward to my next 10 years of the game.