

# Curious Obsession: An Inquiry of *Magic: The Gathering* and Its Cultural Relevancy

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## Writer's Statement

*Magic: The Gathering* is a game that sits very dear to my heart and has been for a very long time. I started playing with my older brothers when I was around 7 years old, and, ever since then, *Magic: The Gathering* has been a way for me to bond with my family, make friends, and to spend time with the people I love. As I've grown older, I've come to understand more and more about the game, and how it has changed and aged with me. *Magic: The Gathering* is deep, varied, and complex due to its nature and age, which has captivated me to no end throughout my time playing the game and especially through my research. Moreover, *Magic: The Gathering* has meant so much to me over such a long time. This article is a conduit through which I can express my appreciation for the game and those with whom I play it; I hope my readers will share this appreciation.

## Fresh Start: Introduction

*Magic: The Gathering* (MTG) is a trading card game first published by Wizards of the Coast (WOTC) in 1993. First envisioned by Richard Garfield, *Magic: The Gathering* brought forth a completely unique style of card game: one where collecting the game pieces and building your deck was just as, or even more important, than the gameplay itself. Since MTG first hit the market, it has developed a devoted fanbase, enchanting players with stories of far-off worlds, powerful magic, adventure, and heroism. This paper seeks to prove that, over its lifetime, the innovations that MTG brought to gaming solidified it as an intergenerational cultural phenomenon through creative storytelling and dynamic gameplay.

## Ideas Unbound: Inception of MTG

Ever since its inception, *Magic* was intended to be a highly social game. Richard Garfield (2013) explores this in one of his design blogs while discussing the transition between the first and second versions of the game:

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.

*Magic: The Gathering* was always intended to be played amongst a group of people, social dynamics and all. Trading, selling, buying, and winning cards were all intended mechanics, as well as all of the interactions players would have and the reputations they would build. This social and highly personal nature defines the game, how players interact with it and each other, and plays a crucial role in enticing new players to learn how to play.

Playing games on kitchen floors, lunchroom tables, and in empty classrooms is a collective memory shared by the majority of *Magic: The Gathering* players, especially by those who played in its early years. Garfield illustrates this in another one of his design blogs (Garfield, 2013), reminiscing over a time when he was first designing the game; he recalls when he was

playing with one of his colleagues at 10:00 at night, and ended up playing the game until the sun rose the next day. Many players share memories similar to this when they were young, spending hours playing with their friends, trying to squeeze in games whenever they could: between classes, during lunch, after school, and late at night. These memories and this fondness are key factors in explaining why *Magic* attracts the attention of so many players.

Initially, the concept was for MTG to be owned by one person in a household, like any other board game. The pool of cards was to be split between the players, and, through playing the game, the card pool would slowly change and players could change their decks between rounds (Garfield, 2013). However, the philosophy behind what the game was intended to be changed quickly. As Mark Rosewater, *Magic's* current lead designer states,

When looking at *Magic's* origins, it's important to understand that Richard Garfield wasn't designing the game for what it became. No one could have. You don't design a game expecting it to be a phenomenon that changes the landscape of gaming. He was making a game, like any other game, that you'd buy at your local game store. You'd spend what you normally spent on a game (about \$20 to \$30 back in 1993) and play at home with your friends. If you had fun, on occasion, you might buy a booster pack to supplement what you already had (2024, para. 3).

As shown in this quote, *Magic: The Gathering* had a very significant impact on the landscape of gaming and quickly became a cultural phenomenon. This was not necessarily by intention; it was not Garfield's purpose to change the landscape of gaming when releasing *Magic: The Gathering*, he was only intending to design a game to be enjoyed by like-minded people. He quickly realized that what he had created was something dynamic, engaging, and, most importantly, incredibly popular that redefined the boundaries of what a board game could be.

### **Rampant Growth: How MTG has Changed Over Time**

Instantly, *Magic: The Gathering* was a smash hit, selling out its first Alpha printing of 2.6 million cards, printing another 7.3 million, and selling out of those as well. This initial printing contained 302 unique cards (Wizards of the Coast, 2008). Since the first printing in 1994, there have been 111 additional printed expansion sets, including over 30,000 unique cards, according to Scryfall's database (Scryfall, 2026). Each expansion set (excluding Universes Beyond) takes place on a "plane", which can be thought of as an alternate dimension that certain characters can travel to and from. Each plane has its own identity, theme, and story, which allows the game to explore many different genres of fantasy. These genres range from the Norse-mythology-inspired Kaldheim to the Japanese-folklore-inspired Kamigawa to the dark, gloomy set of vampires, werewolves, and zombies of Innistrad (Wizards of the Coast, 2008). As Rosewater states,

The key to success in game design is making sure that your game has something for every player to be passionate about (and not necessarily the same thing). Success comes from making sure every player loves something about your game, not from focusing on making sure no player hates anything about it (2019, para. 6).

This illustrates the importance of having a wide variety of genres, characters, and themes within *Magic: The Gathering*. It's no coincidence that so many MTG sets are based around already existing cultural phenomena. Allowing players to identify with a theme they already love encourages them to become even further engrossed in the game. Moreover, this diversity also allows players to experience a wider variety of themes that they may not have already been exposed to.

It's no secret that the design philosophy of *Magic* has changed over time either. Being that the game is over 30 years old, it is by no means the same game that it was during its debut. Rosewater discusses this in one of his design blogs:

There are a lot of things we took as a given that we're starting to reevaluate. How casual is *Magic* supposed to be? How does competitive play connect to the larger ecosystem? What level of complexity is correct? How many mechanics is a set supposed to have? How many sets are we supposed to make a year? How much innovation does *Magic* need? What role should nostalgia be playing? How backwards compatible do new themes and mechanics have to be? (2024, *The Seventh Stage* section, para. 6).

This quote plainly shows how MTG is in a state of revision, and the questions that the game designers ask themselves when adding new content to the game. As the game ages, the playerbase ages with it; younger players pick up the game, and older players leave it on the proverbial shelf. Over time, this shifting playerbase and change in design philosophy causes the game to change. A new player taking a very short look at the list of cards printed in Alpha would be able to tell you that there's something different, not just that the art style and rules text formatting have changed, but that the design philosophy itself has changed. Countless changes have been made to the rules of the game, many mechanics have been added, and plenty have been shelved, intended to never be printed again. There's even a scale the game designers use to indicate how likely a mechanic is to be printed in future sets, called the Storm Scale, named after the Storm mechanic (Rosewater, 2022). All this is to say that the incredible diversity and complexity of the game, combined with its age, means that it is a mutable entity with a history and culture, much like the stories, themes, and cultures it draws from.

### **Indomitable Creativity: Why MTG Means so Much to so Many**

In his paper *The Sense of Wonder*, Medlock discusses how the growth of understanding and lived experiences contribute to the development of nostalgia and a lost sense of wonder. He states,

Remnants of obsolete play patterns and once-competitive strategies permeate collective memories, enticing players to both revisit and reflect. Player desires to reengage with previous content releases have resulted in the formation of a collectors' market for discontinued products, as well as community managed formats that exclusively allow early cards like "Premodern." (Medlock, 2024, p. 4)

This illustrates how impactful the sense of nostalgia is to the current game of *Magic: The Gathering*. With the continual release of cards, there is a bias to include newer, more powerful cards in more recently built decks, using newer play patterns and strategies. Due to this, there is a pervading sense of loss felt when players leave behind sets of cards and strategies that they feel sentimentally attached to. This is further exacerbated by the attachment players have to the characters, events, and stories represented in the cards, not just the cards themselves. Seth Glickman discusses the nature of the stories represented in these cards and how they relate to the player experience (Glickman, 2024, pp. 12–16). Glickman describes an example of this with the illustrations on a set of three cards: Sun Titan, Animate Dead, and Terminate. The first, Sun Titan, depicts a towering giant donned in holy armor, evoking a sense of holy justice and power. The card's flavor text, a section of text at the bottom of a card used for embellishment, states: "A blazing sun that never sets." The next card printed later that year, Animate Dead, depicts the shambling corpse of the previously mentioned Sun Titan being resurrected by some unholy force. It bears only pieces of its previously spotless armor, now tarnished and dirty. The final card in this saga, Terminate, printed in 2017, evokes powerful imagery of Sun Titan being burned to pieces, screaming in agony as it is helplessly reduced to dust. The card bears the

flavor text “All suns must set.” While this Sun Titan character is never named or mentioned anywhere else in MTG lore, players can stitch together a narrative in which this great archon of holy justice was killed by some powerful, unholy force, then later, its corpse reanimated to serve the bidding of some greater dark power. There are so many parts of this story left unanswered, but these unanswered questions allow players to construct their own narrative of what happened to this unnamed character, and even embed themselves in the story as the holy force commanding the Sun Titan, or reanimating its shambling corpse. This allows players to construct a deeper sentimental attachment to their cards and the characters represented, amplifying the aforementioned sense of nostalgia.

The social nature of the game is another extremely important part of how the culture of the game has developed and changed over time. Limbert discusses the importance of the social aspects of *Magic: The Gathering*. He posits that, as simple as it is stated in the name of the game, gathering with other players is a key piece of what defines the game (Limbert, 2012, p. 39). The culture of the game is heavily influenced by the shared understanding of the complex mythos of the game. As stated by Crutcher, “*Magic* requires players to manage a deep and complex mythos, layered worlds (e.g., Theros and Innistrad), large-scale conflicts and their evolutions, a sophisticated ludic language, and an intertextual and adaptive narrative.” (Crutcher, 2017, Conclusion) When players develop this deep connection to their cards and the story told within them, it allows players to bond deeply with each other as well. Through the deep connections that *Magic: The Gathering* players share, its complex and intricate culture is formed.

### **Expressive Iteration: The Importance of Self-Expression Through Deckbuilding**

*Magic: The Gathering* is a creative conduit through which players can express themselves. Self-expression is an incredibly important part of leisure and creativity, and MTG seeks to scratch that itch amongst its playerbase, and does so well. Rosewater states in his blog *Why Diversity Matters in Game Design* the importance of giving players a connection with the game by allowing them to influence it. He states that allowing players to express themselves encourages them to connect more quickly and more strongly than they would otherwise, so allowing players to decide on their own playstyle is important (Rosewater, 2019). Following this logic, *Magic: The Gathering* was designed to be inherently self-expressive. When a player constructs a deck of cards to play with, they make thousands of decisions about what kinds of cards they want to include and exclude, what the strategy of the deck should be, how powerful they want the deck to be, how they want to win games, how they want to interact with their opponents, and what kinds of decks they want their deck to be able to play against. There are 30,000 unique cards and over 90,000 unique printings on Scryfall’s database. There are a myriad of combinations of cards and strategies that players can employ. Therefore, each deck is carefully and personally crafted, a reflection of the personality of the builder.

Rosewater discusses three categories that *Magic: The Gathering* players fall into, named Timmy, Johnny, and Spike. In summation, Timmy players enjoy the social aspect of the game, playing large, flashy cards to revel in the spectacle of it all, and to share this excitement and experience with their friends. Johnny players enjoy building decks with unique, new strategies using rules and play patterns that many players haven’t considered. They think of the game equally as a puzzle to be solved and as a game to be played, and love generating interesting and creative solutions to the problems their decks face. Spike players love to play competitively. Not to say that Spike players only play the game to win, rather they thrive when squeezing every little bit of performance out of their deck and testing their skills against others. These categories are inherently generalizations, and almost all players exhibit some combination of all three of these characteristics, but these personas exemplify the core motivations the vast majority of players hold (Rosewater, 2013).

The key connection that all of these characteristics share is that they're a reflection of the player's personality on their deck and play pattern. Almost every player who is sufficiently experienced in the game identifies closely with one of these tropes, and recognizes that their decks are a reflection of how they see themselves, how they see the game, and how they see the world. Therefore, it could even be argued that building a *Magic: The Gathering* deck is as much of an art form in and of itself as it is a means to play the game. This plays another extremely important role in why MTG is held so close by the players who enjoy it, being that the inherent self-expression in deckbuilding enhances the players' attachment and enjoyment significantly.

### Closing Statement

*Magic: The Gathering* is a game that has a lot of importance to many people, and for good reason. In its infancy, MTG offered dynamic gameplay that was different from any other board game at the time. It introduced something unique and engaging that players loved. Additionally, MTG further entices players by allowing them to engage with cultural themes they already know and love, and share those experiences with others. The literary nature of the game is also incredibly important. When players are able to engage with the stories presented in the cards, it develops a deep attachment that players are able to share with one another. Clearly, *Magic: The Gathering* is an incredibly important and influential piece of media, so it's no wonder that the game has only grown over the past 30 years and has redefined the nature of what a game can exist as and the deep meaning it can hold for its players.

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