Photographs by Rosanne Olson

How Wizards of the Coast
launched a card game,

a publishing success,

and a cultural phenomenon

making MAGIC

By Harry C. Edwards

The game, until a few turns ago, had been going my way. My opening hand and early draws had yielded a good mix of lands and creatures. I was playing a "green weenie" deck, and had quickly reduced my opponent's life down to 4 before he was able to hit me with any damage. But he's been getting out some powerful creatures the last few turns and all I'm drawing is land. His last attack left me with 1 life and 2 creatures. I played a Nevinyrral's Disk, which destroyed not only all of his creatures and artifacts, but mine as well. The outcome of the game would depend on whether or not I could draw a creature my next turn. . . .

When Wizards of the Coast released Magic: The Gathering in summer 1993, the company not only introduced a new type of game—the trading-card game—but launched a new industry as well. Magic's immense popularity has made Wizards of the Coast (WotC) one of the publishing success stories of the decade. While traditional playing cards typically sell for $2 a deck, WotC has created a market that will happily pay $8.95 for a 60-card starter deck or $2.95 for a 15-card booster pack. And it has sold lots of them.

The story of how Magic began has taken on almost legendary proportions for those in the card-game industry. In 1991 Richard Garfield, a math professor at Whitman College in Washington State, approached Peter Atkinson, president of a fledgling company called Wizards of the Coast, about producing a board game called RoboRally that Garfield had designed. Atkinson agreed. Garfield then showed Atkinson another game he had been working on called Mana Flash. Atkinson was interested, Mana Flash became Magic: The Gathering, and WotC had a hit on its hands.

Three years later, there are more than two billion Magic cards in print, and the game has been translated into French, Italian, German, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean. WotC, located just south of Seattle, has grown from a small basement operation to a significant entertainment company with annual revenues in excess of $100 million.

Dozens of other trading-card games have been born in Magic's wake, including some bearing the names of the biggest franchises in the entertainment business, such as Star Wars, Star Trek, and the X-Files. All have tried to copy Magic's formula for success. But none has managed to capture hearts, minds, and pocketbooks quite like Magic.

Magic: The Gathering appeals both to card collectors, who will pay up to several hundred dollars for certain out-of-print cards, and to gamers, who purchase cards in large quantities in an effort to build better and more competitive decks. If you're over 35, you've probably never heard of Magic (unless you're a parent). But if you're in your teens, 20s, or early 30s, chances are you've heard about the game, seen it, or even played it. Magic has been banned in many elementary and middle schools. Players have been known to spend upwards of $10,000 collecting Magic cards. There's even a professional Magic tournament that tours North America. In a few short years, Magic has woven itself into the modern lore of popular culture.

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No one really knows when the first card game was invented. According to David Parlett's *A History of Card Games*, card playing first started showing up in the literature in the latter part of the 14th century. Thanks in part to the invention of the printing press and improvements in paper production, card games became all the rage in Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries. During this period several suit systems developed, which varied from country to country. The most recognized suit system today—spades, hearts, clubs, and diamonds—developed in France during the late 1400s. Many of today's most popular card games were created around this four-suit system, with cards numbered 1 through 10 plus three face cards. Some of these games, such as bridge, require a considerable mathematical ability to play. Almost all rely on the shuffle to randomize the game.

Like these card games, Magic requires mathematical aptitude, and the shuffle is essential to creating unique and unexpected card combinations. Magic also has a suit system of sorts. Cards are organized into five colors—white, red, blue, green, and black—with each color having its own unique play characteristics. But unlike games that depend on 52 cards, the Magic universe consists of more than 2,000 cards, with hundreds of new cards coming into play each year. Mark Rosewater, one of WotC's game developers, likens Magic to Monopoly—but with a twist. "Imagine that every time you play Monopoly new properties appear on the board, some of which you've never seen before. And instead of four railroads, there may be six, or airports instead. This is what Magic is like, and what keeps it fresh from game to game and player to player."

There are two aspects to playing Magic—deck building and actually playing the game. You build a deck by purchasing cards in either 60-card starter decks or booster packs of 8 to 15 cards. Gamers will spend hours and hours surfing Magic-related Web sites or studying magazines like *Inquest*, *Scrye*, or WotC's own house organ, *The Duelist*, in search of new and useful deck-building strategies. It usually takes several hundred cards to begin to create a competitive deck. Magic cards are classified as common, uncommon, and rare. Rare cards are usually the most powerful and desirable, as well as the most difficult to get. The more cards you

buy, the better your chance of getting the really good rares—and consequently a better deck. For WotC, this is a remarkable formula for generating cash.

Players often complain that only the well-heeled—those who can spend hundreds of dollars buying cards in search of the elusive rares—can afford to build the really powerful decks. In response, a type of tournament format called the "sealed deck" was introduced, to level the playing field by testing a player's ability to win with a random combination of cards. This format requires, however, that each player purchase a new starter deck and two booster packs.

To play Magic, each player starts with a life total of 20. The object of the game is to reduce your opponent's life total to 0. You can inflict "damage" to an opponent by attacking with creatures and other "spells," which are brought into play by mana-producing land cards. Learning this complicated game requires an attentive and nimble mind. Also, like most card games, it requires an ability to interact with other people.

WotC marketers are quick to point out that Magic is fundamentally a social game, unlike computer games, which are essentially solitary in nature. Indeed, in most major cities in North America and Europe, it's not hard to find people to play Magic with—at a coffee shop, a university commons, or the back room of a hobby-game retailer.

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t he most striking thing about Magic cards is the artwork. The cards depict a fantastic world populated by elves, vampire bats, gnomes, sea serpents, and grotesque beings, as well as heroes and heroines. This fantasy element links Magic to role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons, and to the literature of J. R. R. Tolkien. And while Magic has borrowed from fantasy, it has also helped to transform the genre. Sue Ann Harkey, the art director for Magic, states, "Magic broadened fantasy art enormously. Traditional fantasy art was locked into photo-realism. Magic came along and loosed it way up. The art was much more abstract and tolerant to more styles."

Producing a set of Magic cards is an enormous task. Work on a new expansion begins in WotC's research and development group, which develops the game mechanics for each card and "play-tests" them. The cards are then sent to the continuity group, which sees it that each card is named, matched to the game's "backstory" (Magic is set in the fantasy world of Dominia, and each expansion represents a new facet of that world), and assigned a piece of "flavor" text. From there, the cards go to the art director.

Harkey likens her job to that of an art broker—for 1996 she reckons that she will commission more than $1,000,000 of art. For the Mirage release due out in October, Harkey assigned more than 350 pieces to some 70 artists. She chooses artists based on their originality and technique. The artists render their work in a variety of media—usually oil, acrylic, or airbrush.

The images they produce are based on instructions about what the card does, but the artists are given a great deal of leeway in rendering card art. In return, they're well paid—up to $1,000 per card—and enjoy a celebrity status of sorts within the Magic community. Retailers often sponsor events where the artists are available for card signing, and several artists are usually invited along on WotC's promotional tours for Magic.

After the art has been turned in, it's sent out for camera work. The resulting 4-by-5 transparencies are brought back to WotC, where they're digitized on an Agfa transparency scanner. Next, the artwork is opened in Photoshop, where it's sized, cropped, and matched for color against the original art. The color-corrected file is then dropped into a card template containing the borders and background and exported as a TIFF file. Text is added in Macromedia FreeHand, and card files are ganged electronically in batches of 25 to 30 cards and output as four-color film separations.

In preparation for printing, the pieces of film are manually stripped into printer's forms of between 110 and 120 cards. Cards are assigned to the forms depending on their rarity—common, uncommon, and rare. The stripped films are then shipped to a printing plant in either Belgium or the United States for platemaking and printing. After the cards are printed, they're cut, collated, and packaged into either starter decks or booster packs. A 12-card booster pack will usually get 1 card from the rare sheet, 3 from the uncommon sheet, and 8 from the common sheet.

The art for Magic cards is produced by independent artists, most of whom work in "conventional" media (usually oil, acrylic, or airbrush)—though some, including Bill Sienkiewicz (below), do a portion of the work in Photoshop. Here are a few pieces that have appeared on recent cards.

Greg Simanson

Bill Sienkiewicz

Z. Plucinski & D. A. Gregory

Alan Rabinowitz

Terese Nielsen

D. Alexander Gregory

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Why is Magic so successful? And why haven't other card games done as well? One reason is that Magic was the first of its class; another is that it's simply a very good game. Also, though, its popularity is self-reinforcing. As Mark Rosewater points out, good card games like Magic require a big investment, both of time to learn the game and of money to develop a good collection of cards. "When players do find the time and inclination to pick up another game, they're faced with a dilemma—which game to choose? Everyone plays Magic—but not everyone plays Shadowfist, Middle-earth, or Star Wars." Even the trading-card-game magazines heavily skew their coverage towards Magic. For example, *Inquest*, the largest of these publications, usually devotes only a small part of an issue to games other than Magic.

WotC itself has two other card games besides Magic. Vampires: The Eternal Struggle, which is based on a Gothic horror role-playing game, is the stepchild of the WotC family. Despite its loyal following, it has never found wide acceptance among gamers, mainly because of the vampire genre and the adult and sometimes disturbing nature of the game.

On the other hand, the company is placing high hopes on Netrunner, which was released in April and is based on R. Talsorian's role-playing game Cyberpunk 2020. Netrunner is very different from Magic. The game's graphics are hard-edged, computer-generated, and—well, cool. The game is somewhat easier to learn than Magic and should appeal to fans of cyberpunk and science fiction—or at least that's what WotC is hoping for.

WotC knows all too well the fickle nature of the gaming market. Last winter, a slow retail environment sent chills throughout the industry. Many companies, including WotC, went through layoffs and cut unprofitable segments of their businesses. Many attributed the slowdown to a glut of poorly designed card games that were taking up shelf space and confusing consumers. It was a traumatic period for the industry and for WotC in particular—this was the first time many staffers had ever experienced layoffs. Most observers expect the future of WotC to look something like that of TSR, the creators of Dungeons and Dragons. After experiencing explosive growth in the early 1980s, TSR went through several lean years before finding a sustainable level of business.

At the moment, WotC's dominance in the trading-card-game industry appears invulnerable. It's been estimated that the industry grossed somewhere between $175 million and $200 million in 1995, with WotC's share thought to be somewhere in the $100 million to $140 million range.

WotC is working hard at broadening the appeal of Magic: The Gathering. Company marketers are fond

The rest of the pack

Although Magic: The Gathering dominates the business of trading-card games, it's not the only player. Most of the others have adopted the same basic model for producing and distributing cards. The games are usually sold in 60-card starter decks and in 12- to 15-card booster packs. Some games, especially those with a recognizable franchise behind them, have found their way into major book and retail chains such as Waldenbooks, B. Dalton, and Tower Records. However, the backbone of trading-card-game distribution is the local hobby and games retailer. Here are some of the more popular games after Magic.

Star Wars. Decipher Inc., Norfolk, Va. Based on the movie franchise, Star Wars is probably the second most-popular trading card game after Magic.

Shadowfist. Daedalus Entertainment, Mercer Island, Wash. An original, fast-action game based on Hong Kong cinema, Shadowfist has been well reviewed in the trading-card-game press.

Middle-earth—The Wizards. Iron Crown Enterprises, Charlottesville, Va. Based on J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Middle-earth is probably the only trading-card game to seriously rival Magic in both art and game play. Over the last year, it has developed a loyal and growing player community.

Netrunner. Wizards of the Coast, Renton, Wash. Based on Cyberpunk 2020 from R. Talsorian Games, Netrunner re-creates the classic cyberpunk conflict between hacker and corporation. At $17.95, Netrunner is the most expensive trading-card game on the market—the game requires two decks to play, one for the runner and one for the corporation.

of referring to Magic as an "intellectual sport," and towards that end the company launched a professional tour in several cities in which players compete for cash prizes. While it's doubtful whether this spin on the game will cause Magic to rival chess or poker, Magic likely has as much staying power as other popular games such as Trivial Pursuit, Monopoly, and Risk.

In the near term, the future of Magic seems bright. Recently, the company shipped Alliances, a Magic expansion of 140 cards. In October, the Mirage expansion (350 cards) is expected for the Christmas season. Mirage introduces several new facets to the game, which should help invigorate Magic sales and renew interest in a game that's already pretty interesting.

I hoped that playing the Nevinyrral's Disk would give me some breathing room and a few turns to reassemble my attack. But my opponent's response was as quick as it was surprising. Without even drawing a card, he played a Lightning Bolt from his hand, which hit me for 3 damage and ended the game. No matter, I was pretty sure I'd win the next game. . . . ◆

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