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Introduction to Folk Studies

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The Players of Magic: The Gathering

Magic: The Gathering, a trading card game created by Wizards of the Coast, has been a popular game within many social circles and strong folk groups since 1993.

Magic: The Gathering (MTG) was the first trading card game of its kind, allowing players a unique and exciting chance to not only play the game but also experience a rich and ever-evolving story along the way. The game allows a player to indulge in their own creativity, strategy and imagination and has accumulated millions of players from all over the world. The game encourages collecting, trading, deck creating and battling in a mix-and-match approach that allows each player to put his or her own unique twist into the game. Because the game is one of such complexity and encourages creative individuality, the players of MTG become wholly immersed in the game of “Magic,” to them it's not just a card game, but a world that continues to grow each year, it is a daily or weekly part of their lives and has allowed for bonds, traditions, and lore to develop within the folk group, a world where vampires, elves and elemental beings are only the beginning of countless magical creatures at the player's control.

The game can be played with nearly any desired amount of players and generally these groups will meet every day or week to compete against each other. Matthew Willey, a player I talked to says “I always play [MTG] with the same group of people,

my 3 roommates. Occasionally one of my old friends, from high school, will visit and I will play with them as well.” It isn’t uncommon for friends to stay bonded through their love of the game, or for traditional groups to meet up and continue playing through the year. Jordan Embry, another player I discussed the game with says that him and his roommates all play the game and that they put a certain traditional spin on the game. If the trash has been in the bin for a while, or the dishes are piling up and no one seems to want to do anything about them the issues are settled with a round of “Magic.” The prize on the table, not having to clean the apartment, the loser on other hand must clean up the mess.

There can be variation between each of these groups and many of these groups create their own subculture. To start the game the competing players must decide who will take their turn first and there are many ways in which to determine this. One way to do this, and perhaps the most common way, is for each player to role a twenty-sided die. Even this particular method varies, in some groups the player who rolls highest number will take their turn first, in others, it is the player with the lowest. Some groups have each player draw the top card of their deck and “the player with the lowest mana cost will go first.” A “mana cost” is a requirement, within the game, that a player must meet in order to play or “cast” each card. Either of these rituals is practiced before each game, and there are many other variations out there, some groups forming individual rituals. The result of this ritual can be a disadvantage to the game and who will win.

Being the first to go in most games isn’t a huge deal, but in MTG, you don’t want to go first, not generally, because the player that goes first can’t draw a card that turn. You start out with seven cards each, unless you “mull again” which a term that most

players will use when they have to redraw. You are allowed one “mull again” in which you can still draw seven, by the third you have to draw six, the fourth you only draw five and so on. Most players aren’t willing to do this because if they don’t get the proper amount of mana (a special unit

of “cost” to play certain cards)

per hand getting an early

advantage in the game

becomes nearly impossible.

Generally, a player wants

between three to four mana in

their hand and three to four

creature cards (used like pawns

in the game), instants or

sorcery cards (special cards

that help a player gain

advantage), safeguarding a diversity and early gain in the game the round to come. This

is an ideal hand, but a lot of the time players chose to just play with what they have and

hope they draw more mana or more creature cards each turn, during their next drawing

phase.

One of the most important components of MTG is the way the players interact with one another. Throughout my research I’ve noticed that the game can be very competitive and sometimes there is more at stake than simply losing the game. Some of the more experienced or confident players will bet their most prized cards, or even money



on a match. When games are created with higher stakes they can be quite intense and stressed like earlier when I discussed the loser washing the dishes. Most of the players interact with one another like they've known each other for years and, in fact, most have. The point of the game is not only to battle, but to trade and collect and because of this many players make long-term friendships and acquaintances from playing the game.

The basic strategy of the game is to be the player with the most life and the most cards on the battlefield with a less amount in your graveyard. The battlefield is the area in front of you where your creature cards are played. They act as a form of barricade between you and the other player. The graveyard is where you cards go when they "die". The most interesting part of the MTG is how you immerse yourself in it. The player (you) is the most important person in the game. The creatures and spells serve as an army that you control where you can decide whether or not you want to take an attack in which you would lose life on your counter, typically you start out with 20, or you can use your creatures to divert and attack or sacrifice themselves for you, in which depending on their stats, would result in them going to the graveyard. Victory depends on



a player's ability to think in a strategic manner and maintain focus in an ever-changing game environment; one card could completely change a player's fate.

How the game is won is less simple than just attacking and diverting attacks. There is an art to the game and the players are the artists. The players, normally in a group, or between two individuals, sit in a circle and decide who's going first. Once this is decided the game starts. You can only put cards once you have mana out; this is why it is so important to have mana at the beginning of the game. Each card cost a certain amount of mana to play. Some players play the game without ever getting mana or having so little mana that they can't play any of the cards in their hands. Meanwhile other players who have had mana and/or played creature cards can attack you while you're defenseless.

Mana is the second most important part of MTG because without it, you can't play any of your cards whether they are sorcery, instants, artifact, enchantments or creatures. If you have the mana and the cards on the battlefield than you take turns attacking and playing your hand. Some cards will even allow players to be indestructible or allow their creatures to be, typically allowing them to win the game or get some hits in without consequence. Some players will put cards in their decks that make them unstoppable and make it almost impossible to block, allowing you to win the game.

It's hard to say how to win MTG without playing it because there are a variety of ways to win, the simplest being get the life counter of the other players down to zero. Another way to lose the game would be running out of cards to play. This happens rarely, but sometimes if a game runs long enough than it's possible. One player that I observed made a deck for this reason alone. He made a discard deck and bought cards that when he

played the player would have no choice, but to discard however many cards that the card said. This was a sure win and he won. The only downside according him was that if he were to play a group instead of 1 on 1 with that deck, he would have lost because while he was targeting one player, the other players would have time to attack. He had a deck full of discards and mana, but no creatures, which made him defenseless. Playing the game is only a small part of what has kept “Magic” popular. On multiple occasion players will gang up on the weaker player. They form a sort of alliance. Jordan calls it “forming a treaty.” Players will come together to attack the weaker player or the most powerful. Normally in more rule based MTG games, this would be a rule breaker and you would more or less be disqualified from the game, but every group is different and will allow for the rules to be bent.



Some players will only collect, more involved in story building than game play. They build decks, but don't battle with them because they simply enjoy creating worlds and backstories. When I asked one player, Jordan, what his favorite part of the game was he responded “I'm more intrigued by the collective stories of each set than by the actual

game play. If fans took time to read each story they would see that the game is about far more than collecting, it is a chance to explore a story and a universe in a more interactive manner. The trading and the battling are certainly fun but it is the narrative that really keeps me invested in the franchise.”

Whether they choose to battle or not the players tell stories through their decks, each card adding a new layer to the plot and over all strategy of the game. As I watched a game, one player told me the deck he created was concentrated around “devil” and “demon” creatures and that he had constructed the deck to be a destructive force, with



cards that were meant to damage the other player swiftly and relentlessly. His opponent told me that she was using a deck she had crafted herself that was themed around forest creatures and elemental beings, her cards were primarily used to heal and sustain her life points. I found this interesting since her actual career is in fitness and wellness,

so her deck reflected her perfectly. Both were veterans of the game, but both had nearly opposite strategies, a factor that is common in a game that relies so much on individuality. Many players will create decks based off themselves and will generally

reflect the player, however many create the decks to be more powerful rather than creative.

A lot of the players who take part in MTG play the game because it offers individuality and allows them an escape, much like gamers in general. Players play games for acceptance, curiosity, power, tranquility and mostly, to have a sense of self, and identity. People crave to be a part of something bigger than them, a group, (Manrique, Victor). Players will come together from all over for this escape or sense of identity. Many places around Bowling Green, KY, even host Magic: The Gathering nights where players can come and have a safe and secluded place to trade and battle with one another. These places allow all forms of players and encourage them to be unique and bring that to the table when they are battling. When discussing the individuality of the game Jordan stated that “[MTG] allows me to experience a story in a new way. I’m not only reading but also interacting with the narrative. I can actually use characters and allowing the over arching story to be a guiding force in how I choose to play the game.”

Even though battling, trading and collecting are the major components to the MTG, with social media rising, much of the folklore has turned into memes. Players or those who are aware of MTG create cards online, they put a celebrity on them and give them attack/defense and special abilities. Most often the abilities will reflect the celebrities’ flaws or something that they are most famous for, but more popular are characters from television shows or movies. This is humor that players or those knowledgeable about MTG will know and talk about. Any one outside of the game looking in would be confused at most of the cards created for the game if they don’t play. Often players will mesh their favorite shows or characters with it to help bring awareness

to the game or their favorite show. I asked Jordan what he thought about the rising trend in “Magic” being used in meme culture and responded that “[the trend] doesn’t bother me, in fact, I’m actually glad to see it. It’s comforting to know that the popularity of the game has risen to a point where people are making it a trend on Internet culture. It continues to gain popularity, hopefully that means [“Magic’] will have longevity.”

When “Magic” is examined from the outside its complexity and long history can be overwhelming. When we observe the game closer, it becomes obvious that the complex nature of the game is simply one of countless ways it attracts players and readers. The game is unique in its allowance to the player’s own imagination, letting him or her create the world they play in, or using the campaign story to put their own twist on the way they play. Magic has brought people together and created friendships, crafted through battles and adventures. The players, though unique, form their own traditions and rules when playing and provide a relaxing environment for such a complicated game. It is through its fans—their customs and individualism—that “Magic the Gather” can continue to grow into the massively popular and creative epic that it had become.

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