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Magic, a postmodern plaything and the community meaning

Guillaume Fontaine & Gilles Brougère

What are our playthings today and what do they reveal of our society? It is to this question that we would like to provide some elements of an answer. Playthings, whether games or toys, are experiencing major developments. The most obvious ones concern the technological aspect and the growing role of computer technology in play activities. But there are other developments that seem to us to be more general and fundamental which are related to the status of the object of leisure or entertainment in which the toy and the game participate in our society.

We consider a game as a mean of socialization in so far as it offers to players the exercise of their own sociability through cultural figures and senses that belong to there. Magic is an American collectible trading and playing cards game which is played all over the world since 1993. It combines the modernity that we are seeking for with aspects, which could not be more traditional. Above all, it is card game. Our analysis can focus on the novelty and originality of this phenomenon without referring it to technological innovations. We will try to show that all characteristics of *Magic* are in connection with that we call "postmodern".

Magic is a game of cards with abstract rules, which may be considered as relatively complex, involving tactical and strategic possibilities. This game has been developed over a long period by its designers, with a number of tests and modifications to obtain the best balance guaranteeing its playability. It is a game, which supposes the commercial act of purchasing the material and the rules prior to all games. When you play Magic, you have to buy cards, so many cards. Basic game includes 350 different cards. Since 1993, Wizards of the Coast have edited more than 3500 cards. Each year two or three limited editions of 300 cards can be purchased. So the main difficulty for Magic players is to master the quantity. A large amount of cards means both a money problem and a cognitive problem. A cognitive problem because of the learning process we explained above: how can a human brain control 3500 units and the potential links between them? Magic is not a plaything in the used

meaning of the term. It is not a totality. The play material is moving and changes every year. The editor sells a potential environment and probabilities of play; a Magic player reveals potentials and probabilities of play by building decks. We are near of a quanta perception of the world. One aspect of the postmodern reflection is to throw an orderly reality away. There no global rationality, no feeling of a unique truth. We can't seize Magic in its totality. If someone does it, it would be less a player than a collector.

There is a close relationship between the principle of the personalized packet and the marketing, which encourages the purchase. The cards can also be exchanged or sold on a parallel market in relation to their popularity. We can't think Magic without its marketing dimension. A double symmetrical error must be avoided in the analysis. Only seeing in it a marketing process, a means of selling cards, would be to ignore the interest and value of the game including in the logic of the personalized packet. Or to ignore the commercial dimension to only analyze the game principle and the reference universe. What I think is interesting in such a product is the connection of the two things. The game is only possible through the commercial distribution but the commercial diffusion is only done in relation to the cultural and play significance of the game. We might say that contemporary marketing conditions generate new game possibilities, which may only exist in this framework.

The second aspect, which is going to give a new dimension to the game, is that before the abstract structure of the game, the author uses a strong symbolic dimension. The cards bear representations and the actions are decipherable in the metaphorical language of the world of magic created around the game. We rediscover here the imaginary reference world of role-playing games. But if we observe players playing, we see that the players play like classic card players and do not use the imaginary world contrary to role-play where it is omnipresent in the episodes of the game and the verbal exchange between players. But this symbolic world is underlying and emerges through the illustrations. The world of magic takes roots from multi racial and cultural references. Greek, Nordic, Japanese, Indian myths are mixed with fantasy figures. Players play Magic in Asia, Europe, and America. It is a baroque melting pot of signs and images. Magic has an international dimension.

These illustrations contribute to a story line that appears and becomes more explicit through evolutions of Magic. The world is more and more

precise, legendary characters make a link between the last expansions of the game, new cards represents new steps of their quests. Those events and figures belong to the universe of fantasy, where monsters and magic exist. Role playing games, video games, movies, and science fiction literature show and set symbolic elements of these imaginary worlds inspired by medieval folklore. A community of players shares cultural signs, strong values that emerge through virtual worlds. A plaything therefore contributes to gather people around images it creates. We have to consider now a game as a media: it is a way of communication and socialization between human beings. A hobby makes sense and I share this sense with my peers. I stay with them because we confer to the game the same meaning; in return the game reflects signification that I want to share. We have here the basic structure of the game not only in its play logic, but also in its cultural logic of an object bearing several dimensions.

This narrative dimension of the game, the marketing process, the great number of cards and the links between players contribute to create the metagame. The company does not sell cards; it is selling a universe, which enables cards to be played. For this it proposes the game and an environment, the metagame, including the value-enhancement of the symbolic universe (books and tee shirt), a means of meeting and dialogue (Internet server, review), a game system through tournaments. Richard Garfield (1995), the author himself develops the concept of metagame,

Trading card games inherently have a strong metagame component. This is because the flow of cards is itself part of the game. There is always a bigger picture to the games than the hand currently being played. Players think not only « how can I win this game? » but « how should my deck change for the next game? » When people trade cards or buy cards, they are making moves in the metagame, giving themselves more or different options for building their decks.

When I first developed the concept of trading card games, I envisioned that learning about the game would be a part of the game itself [...] players have

been brought together through the metagame of exploring the world of the cards.

[...] Each of these deck-construction restrictions is a different metarule in a metagame.

[...] On top of this natural tendency toward the metagame, we often add new levels by playing in tournaments or leagues. Through the sanctioning and support of different events, the Duelist's Convocation helps create the metagame of Magic tournaments, from the regional level to international competition.

Mike Rosewater (1998), chief editor of *The Duelist* makes a synthesis of the metagame in the following board:

Cards

- > Self-contained cycles (like The Rath Cycle)
- > Feature mechanics that appear for a year (like buy-back and shadow)
- > Rotating basic edition
- > Introductory game (*Portal*)
- > Game supplements (*Vanguard* and *Unglued*)
- > Preconstructed decks
- > Pro Tour and World Championship decks
- > Promotional cards (oversized, alternate art, and book)

Tournaments

- > The DCI
- > Banned and restricted lists

- > The Rules Team and monthly rulings
- > Multiple formats (Standard, Extended, Limited, and Classic)
- > Sixty-card deck limit
- > The Pro Tour (including Qualifiers and the Grand Prix circuit)
- > The World Championships (as well as Regionals and Nationals)
- > A retail league (Arena)
- > Shows on video and ESPN
- > Prerelease tournaments
- > Multiplayer variants

Media and Merchandising

- > Numerous TCG-oriented magazines
- > Official card and spoiler lists

- > Secondary card price lists
- > Iconic characters and a recognizable storyline
- > Novels and comic books dedicated to the story
- > Strategy books and card encyclopedias
- > Licensing (T-shirts, mugs, and calendars)

Computers and the Internet

- > Computerized versions of *Magic* and online gaming
- > Numerous websites (see pages 56-57)
- > Multiple chat rooms and channels
- > Six Usenet groups

Metagame appears clearly through the building of the rules. There are three levels of rules. We have first *principles*. Principles evoke the playing dynamic, the way of playing *Magic*: two sorcerers build decks and confront each other according to specific phases and basic rules. These principles haven't changed any more since the first *Magic* edition.

Each edition worked as a rationalization and simplification of the rules. In a second time we have *cards*: each cards brings a specific effect in the game. Therefore we can say that one card brings one rule. Cards make combinations with other cards to produce new effects. Rules and game effects emerge from the practice of play and from strategies found by the players. So we have a third level of rules called *regulation*. Editor and creators conceived a corpus of tournament regulations, cards power limitations and playing advice in order to balance the game and to regulate Magic playing activity. For example there are laws of building decks according to the type of tournament a player compete. We can easily understand why players need time to learn how to play Magic.

The last aspect of what makes Magic a postmodern thing is its links with the scientific and cybernetic worlds.

The links with a scientific problematic appears through the editorial process. So Wizards of the Coast publish regularly stand-alone editions of Magic. A player can play in a new environment without referring to the basic game and to the previous expansions. These expansions describe a part of a fantastic world, which is a particular thematic region or time. So we have a cold and frozen world with *Ice Age*, the first stand-alone edition of Magic. We find snow, ice people, white and hairy monsters. *Mirage*, the second stand-alone edition, drives players through a warm and wet jungle. Then *Tempest* brings a celestial atmosphere through winds and storms. From ground and fixed water to the warm vapor and up to the liquid water of the rain the game explores an ascensional way through the different states of water physic. Fluids, meteors and climatic changes are strong themes in Magic. This homogeneity of figures contributes to make a link with science. Climatology is a part of modern scientific research. Theories of chaos and researches about complex phenomenon stimulate modern scientific investigation. If we consider Magic as a moving environment of play better than a classical game, if we remember its complexity, we can say that Magic is near to be a chaotic phenomenon. It is a tool with which players manage chaos and world complexity.

How players can master the chaotic aspect of the game? Through its rules and principles I tried to found cognitive ways of managing the game. Players revealed me they were familiarized with video games and computers. It drove me on the way of a cybernetic approach of Magic. When a player builds his deck, he reads cards. But his mind makes

necessary links with other cards. He puts together few cards, makes choice to find combinations. There are symbols, icons, images, texts printed on the cards. The reading process is not linear but works as a hypermedia or hypertext. Building a deck means choose one way through thousand possibilities of creation. Video games drive players into virtual worlds. A video game is a media designed by a creator for players. It's a communication medium between them. Through virtual words human beings find a way of communication, a way to share cultural meanings. Magic works as a media. It is a game, which allows players to build a unique packet. A deck is a personal construction. Postmodernity emphasizes about the existence of a variety of built rationality. Magic manages thousand of interpretations, points of view on the game. There is no essence of Magic. Without assembling, collecting and building decks, the game would not exist.

After analyzing the game, it would be interesting to analyze the players and what they have to say about their hobby. I discover that players had reflexive thoughts on Magic, on their practice, on the market... The following results proceed from ten interviews in three different places. Two of these places consist of a sale space (games shop) where players have opportunities to play and communicate. The other one is a club where players come every week in order to play role playing, strategic and cards games. I applied methods of literary analyzes on the speeches I picked up and tried to find specific vocabularies or language reiterations out. Interviews therefore will confirm each other and could paint a portrait of what is a Magic player and which meanings this player gives to the game.

Players I met were all males from 16 to 24. It seems it is a representative sample of motivate players. There are a lot of younger people. They are few girls but I didn't meet them in places where I investigated. If we take an average of interviewed players, we find a 21 old male student. All of them have been playing for a long time and know a lot of games. They play or played role playing games, board games and video games. They are in majority familiarized with computers. The two shops offer moreover opportunities to play with net linked computers. They have been playing Magic for a long time. Average are three years and half of play. We note certain fidelity. When a player tells he left playing Magic off, he says he continues to buy cards and when a player stops to buy cards, he continues to play.

The following board is a synthesis of what they are.

N°	Age	Play from	Learn Magic from	Playing activities	Studies	Players	Place
1	17	2 years	friend	Strategic games Diplomacy Warhammer Battle Video games	1 ^{ère} S	friends	Shop Game Center
3	21	4 years ½	2 friends	Warhammer Battle Role playing games Video games	BTS bio	friends Brother	Game center Convention
4	24	4 years ½	shop	Role playing games Card games Board games	Master psycho Jobs	friends Any player	Game Center Province
5	24	8 month	friend	Diplomacy Tarot, belote, Chess	Master History	friends	friends Paris
6	20	4 years	friend	Role playing games Board games Murder party Strategic games Card games Video games	Army Service	friends	Club friends
7	17	3 years	promoter	Role playing games Board games Murder party Strategic games Card games Video games	1 ^{ère} ES	friends	Club friends School
8	25	4 years ½	Professional activity	Role playing games Board games Murder party Strategic games Card games Video games	Postman	friends	Club
9	17	4 years ½	Camping 1 adult	Role playing games Board games Strategic games	1 ^{ère}	Alone Little sister friends	friends Club School

N°	Age	Play from	Learn Magic from	Playing activities	Studies	Players	Place
10	24	4 years ½	friends	Role playing games Board games Murder party Strategic games Card games Video games	Master comm.	Brother friends	Club friends University
Average	21	3 years ½					

Magic is a friend's story. A player plays with peers and in majority learned Magic from a friend of him. The feeling of taking a part in a close community is strong. A player is someone who looks for a group. Magic works as a focus object where players come around to meet each other. Teams appear, in order to be more competitive in tournaments. Friendship, faithfulness and solidarity are Magic players' values. We see here a type of community without referring to the traditional values of family or country. Players meet other players through values and practices, which the game contains.

We saw that we can't separate Magic from the editor marketing process. Players are aware of being a part of a market and they developed a real reflection about money. When we analyze the vocabulary, we note a great variety of economic terms such as

- "Buy low cost"
- "Sell high cost"
- "Fluctuation"
- "Speculate"
- "Budget"
- "Exchange"
- "Commercial"
- "Purchase"
- "Bargain"
- "Parallel market"

All players note that Magic is an expensive hobby and they must spend a lot of money to build a competitive deck by purchasing cards starters and

boosters. They are aware of this economic dimension and they master trading concepts such as budget, purchasing, selling in a second hand at better price, parallel market, trading, the Stock Exchange where cards values decrease or raise because of cards rarity or cards game effects... We can't consider the plaything without its consumption aspect. We can't separate the game from the market that gives it life. It's surprising to see young people so familiarized with consumption uses.

Playing Magic contributes to have a very strong consumption activity. A player who knows how to find game strategies knows financial strategies to obtain his cards. Game and money are coextensive.

Two « social classes » appear when we listen to the Magic players. Few « good players » distinguish themselves from a large mass of « little players » or « bad players ». A feeling of elite emerges. Good players become models for others and tend to play together. They don't have to spend time with other players if they don't have any opportunities to improve their practice. The good players are competitive in tournaments and have money capabilities to travel through France or Europe in order to compete. The best players are decks builders too. They create strategies and combinations throughout the myriad of possibilities of Magic. "Bad" players just make a copy of best builder's deck. A deck must be constructed to be effective. A player said me that "bad" players could win in tournaments because they can't be an ultimate game. No one can affirm that he has found the Deck, there is no verity. Therefore Magic can be considered as a postmodern plaything.

Players gather themselves for tournaments, for meetings, for exchange, for playing. Groups and communities take shape around nomadic places. We can compare these groups with communities on the Internet, where people have choice to meet others in affinity with their cultural interests. The concept of territory don't work anymore and the fact of building decks is mimetic of the fact of create communities. Magic is a world in perpetual construction.

All players are agreeing to note that Magic is a very complex game. All players speak about the difficulty they had to learn Magic. They spent one year in order to understand concepts of game and to practice them. They spent time (hours, nights) to read cards, to create combos, to build a deck. Then they spent time to test their deck with other players. After playtime they think again about what was good and what was bad to

improve the strategy. Playing Magic is a double learning process: playing means a solitary activity of reading cards and finding strategy. So the player gets an individual knowledge of Magic. Playing means also a collective activity through which the player learns new cards, new combos in a communication process with peers. So the player get a collective and practical knowledge of Magic. A Magic player can stay alone: it is a mark of postmodern activity. Solitary play of children, occidental reading culture, video games... It is a trait of an individuation process in our society.

Magic is a teen-ager and adult game. But if we analyze the plaything through the mediation of its social and cultural components, we could operate a synthesis with results of others researches like toys or younger children plaything. So we hope a global study of play and games will emerge from cross-checking. We think this postmodern symposium should contribute to it.

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