

Magic: The Obsession

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Another Kind of Magic

It was Friday night in downtown State College, home of Penn State University. This school is known as one of the biggest party schools in the nation, so Friday nights are usually filled with excitement and carousing, and tonight was no different. As I got out of my car on top of the Frasier Street parking garage, I instantly felt the familiar Friday night pulse of downtown. My heart raced in anticipation; the rambunctious combination of loud music and laughter in the streets evoked vivid memories of nights where I sought excitement. The mixture of streetlights and the stars above was magical. Here, high above the chaos below, the unforgiving January wind whipped my face and reminded me to keep moving, as if it knew I had another kind of Magic to go admire.

I was on my way to the local comic shop, Comic Swap, in order to observe a session of Friday Night Magic. Magic: the Gathering is a collectable card game in which players invest money and time into building decks of cards, which they use to compete with one another. Magic: the Gathering was the first game of its kind, and has been extremely popular ever since its release in 1993 (Magic, n.d.). According to the Magic: the Gathering official website, over 12 million people play this card game worldwide (Magic, n.d.). Around the year 2000, players from around the world began gathering at local game stores on Friday nights to play tournaments, and “Friday Night Magic” has since become a regular and official event (Gamepedia, 2017).

An outsider may wonder how a card game could command such devotion from such a large number of people. I know I did, and that’s why I set out to learn more about the people who play Magic. Certainly, as with any social hobby, the players both enjoy the game and the fellowship that comes with it. Moreover, the fantasy aspect of the game allows players to escape their realities and engage their

imaginations, while the strategic aspect of the game allows them to engage their creativity and competitive sides. However, these features are common to any number of social hobbies, including role-playing games and tabletop games. What’s more, neither of these types of games requires the same level of monetary investment that Magic demands. For example, after a person buys the necessary source material to play Dungeons & Dragons, no further purchase is required to play. Not so with Magic. The entire structure of the game is bent towards getting players to buy randomly assorted cards from newly released collections of cards, called “sets.” After hearing how much money many Magic players spend on the game, I began to wonder if something more primal than their love for the game was driving them.

Cardboard Crack

After exiting the garage, I made my way towards a row of tiny basement-style storefront windows where enough light leaked from the windows to illuminate a sleek black railing and a set of worn, unattractive concrete stairs. Above the stairs is a black awning, which reads, “Comic Swap.” I walked down the narrow concrete stairs, and I pulled open the squeaky metal door.

The meticulously categorized shelves of comics stood in contrast to the unsightly staircase and basement setting. The smell of the store brought back childhood memories of Dr. Seuss books. As a child, I loved stuffing my face into books and taking big whiffs. I made my way to the left side of the store where four Magic players were already in their room, setting up the evening’s grey metal foldable tables and chairs. Several backpacks were thrown haphazardly about the floor near the matching grungy, red couch and chair. This room, more basement-like than the rest of the store, is relatively plain and unfinished, with white makeshift walls and fluorescent lights. A large poster of Emrakul, a giant-tentacled monster which looks like it was taken straight from the pages of an H.P. Lovecraft story, dominates the back wall.

Two men were playing a casual game against one another, ignoring me; but as it became clear that I wasn’t going anywhere, they began casting subtle glances in my direction. I became self-conscious, so I introduced myself. They returned my greeting, but remained involved in their

game. Noticing my awkwardness, a curly-haired college student in a Nickelodeon T-shirt smiled at me, and graciously invited me to sit next to him.

I let out a sigh of relief, and quickly skipped to the uncomfortable grey foldable chair. “I’m Pedro,” he introduced himself. His kind, hazel eyes and charismatic demeanor put me at ease while I explained why I was there. He jolted from his seat, and said, “I’m your guy...I’ll teach you everything you need to know.” Instantly, as if in one motion, he flipped his chair towards me, whipped out his worn Magic cards, and almost skipped his words as he spoke to me in what seemed to be another language: “You need land cards and mana cards in order to tap.” Speaking a mile a minute, he passionately showed me his cards and told me their names: “These are tribal mechanics...this is a merfolk...this is a pirate creature.” His passion for the game not only came through what he was saying; his eyes were on fire, his hands danced as he spoke, and his tone practically dripped with enthusiasm. I felt comfortable with him, so I burst out laughing as I pleaded for him to “slow down.”

Our tutorial was interrupted by the shouts of the Magic tournament manager calling out orders, “Alright guys here’s the lineup.” The manager gained the attention of these rambunctious players, called the tournament to order, and assigned them to their seats for the evening.

According to Pedro, the tournament is set up as a “draft,” which means that each player buys three packs of cards from the store at around five dollars a piece, and uses them to build their forty card deck to play the game. The players open one pack at a time, choose one card, and pass it down like an assembly line. I watched in amazement; the unwrapping of gold packs resembled the scene from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, in which Verruca Salt’s father has all of his workers frantically opening packs of chocolate so that they can find the golden ticket. The twinkle in the players’ eyes seemed to reflect their excitement for the night’s event. Other than the crinkling of the cellophane wrappers, the crowd was extremely quiet as they began their hunt for the best card. Pedro broke his silence as he tore open his next gold pack, “We love opening the packs...it’s one of the best parts of the game.”

Another guy chimed in, “Oh yeah, it makes my heart beat fast.” Their excitement was

contagious, and I was reminded of my own feelings earlier on top of the parking garage.

It struck me that eight men between the ages of twenty and thirty sat before me, looking like a bunch of little boys opening presents on Christmas morning. There was more than just childish joy in their eyes; there was a hunger and an anticipation that built up and was released when they tore open the packs. It reminded me of the feelings I experience when I buy a scratch-off lottery ticket. I asked the group, “Can anyone become addicted to opening the packs?”

One player shouted out, “They don’t call it ‘cardboard crack’ for nothing!” The players laughed, and the tournament manager explained how he had a card collection worth over ten thousand dollars. I voiced my amazement; his collection was worth more than my car! Maybe the phrase “cardboard crack” was more than just a joke.

The Hook and the Chase

It is important to note how the business model behind Magic promotes addictive behavior. In order to compete within the profit driven economy, trading card companies created “chase” cards, cards that are more valuable than other cards, in order to “hook” people into buying the best, newest, and most expensive cards (Craddock, 2004, p. 310). Indeed, the similarities between the trading card industry and gambling are strong enough to warrant concern. This is especially true for young people, who are the primary consumer demographic for trading cards (Craddock, 2004). Craddock (2004) stated that hobbies with these traits might lead to maladaptive gambling habits. Magic not only has all of the features which are the cause of Craddock’s concern; the tournament structure provides even more incentive for invested consumers to keep buying cards.

Two of the most popular formats for Friday Night Magic are Standard and Limited. Both of these formats require continued investment if the player wishes to participate in them. The card pool in Standard regularly changes, with older sets leaving the format as new sets are introduced; in Limited format, players buy-in in order to draft new decks from a pool of previously unopened packs of cards. In other words, if players wish to maintain their consumer experience, they have to keep

buying more cards. This pattern is reminiscent of two key features of addictive stimuli: reinforcement, which means that exposure to the stimulus makes it more likely that a person will pursue that same stimulus in the future, and intrinsically rewarding, in which a person finds the stimulus to be gratifying or worthwhile in and of itself (Icahn School of Medicine, n.d.).

The resemblance to an addiction does not stop there: many Magic players use the game as a way to escape into a world of fantasy. Escapism appears to be one of the major motivations for playing Magic; indeed, some level of escapism is necessary to fully engage in the game. Others use it as a way to validate their feelings of narcissism and to find a group with which they can belong. Finally, one of the hallmarks of addiction is that it is pursued regardless of negative consequences (Angres & Bittenardi-Angres, 2008).

At its core, Magic: the Gathering is a business that requires a steady source of revenue: the overall business model attracts people who are susceptible to addictive tendencies and encourages addictive behavior. Throughout my time spent at Comic Swap, I have come to realize that Magic players are aware of the addictive characteristics of the game, and often have similar reasons for playing Magic in the first place.

The Definition of a Scam

I was lost in a Facebook hole, scrolling through my newsfeed while I was waiting for Friday Night Magic to start. It had been a long work week, and I was enjoying my escape into social media land. Adam, one of the regular Magic players, shouted from across the game table, “Don’t worry, Magic players are habitually late.” Another player slouched over his Magic cards, and chuckled as if he agreed.

I snapped out of my Facebook fog, jumped out of the comfy couch, and got focused on why I was there. “Thanks guys, I’m actually early tonight,” I said. This seemed to reaffirm my non-regular status, and without acknowledgment, they returned to their casual game play. As I paced the creaky floor near the “50 cent comics” section, I noticed how quiet and tranquil the store was. My own feeling of tranquility, and my experience with social media outlets, helped me relate and

understand how Magic and other fantasy cultures can act as an escape from the stresses of real life (Martin, 2004). I wandered through the U-shaped wall, and made my way to the front of the store. A group of people walking down the stairs to my right caught my eye through the window on the door. Pedro was not amongst the crowd; however, a girl was joining the Magic tournament tonight, a rare sight indeed! I thought I’d take advantage of this situation, and asked her if I could interview her for my project.

She was one of only two girl players I have seen at these tournaments throughout the course of this semester, so I was thrilled when she said yes. “Let me buy my packs for the night and I’ll meet you by the couches,” she said. As I turned around and made my way to the game room, I noticed how many new players were coming in. Usually there are no more than eight players present on a typical Friday, so I stuck around near the front of the store to see what the deal was. I was informed that tonight was a special Limited tournament night; Magic was celebrating its 25th anniversary.

Having some knowledge about Magic’s business model, I wasn’t surprised to hear that they created a new set of cards for tonight’s event. All of the eager players crowded the counter as they examined the shiny blue artwork on the foil packs. One customer expressed his displeasure, “Oh man, these are *way* more expensive.” To be exact, these packs were twice as expensive as normal. Some other players mumbled under their breath about the cost; however, one-by-one they reached for their wallets and paid the hefty thirty-dollar price. I brought up the inflated price of the anniversary cards with the storeowner, Jay, and he said that it was the definition of a scam. He went on to explain that new sets were also being released more frequently than in the past.

After paying, my new interviewee turned towards me and said, “OK, I’m ready for ya.”

It’s Better Than Heroin, Right?

I learned that her name was Kelsey, and that she was in town for spring break from an art college in Brooklyn, New York. I wasn’t surprised—she seemed like a New Yorker: her demeanor came across as cheeky and cool, she had an edgy sense of style, and was confidently wearing no make-up. She

tossed her black bag on the floor, sat cross-legged style on the red couch, and turned towards me. I explained to her what I was doing for class, and she thought that the project was really interesting. Acknowledging this male-dominated hobby, I asked an obvious question: “What’s it like being a girl in Magic?”

She explained that it had its advantages and disadvantages. One disadvantage she mentioned was “gate-keeping.” Kelsey explained, “Gate-keeping is when they make you prove you are smart enough to play Magic; however, that doesn’t bother me much,” she winked, “I know I’m way smarter than these dudes.” I wondered if this reflected the narcissistic characteristics of Magic players, or if she was just being sassy (McCain et al., 2015).

Although the sexist aspects of the subculture may be annoying to female players, she told me a story about how one time she was able to buy an expensive Magic card from a guy for only \$36. However, when her boyfriend approached the same seller about the card earlier the same day, he was charged \$80. As she laughed about this event, I couldn’t get over the fact that someone would actually buy a *single* Magic card for \$80. Then I remembered how the tournament manager told me he had a Magic collection worth over \$10,000. Magic seems like such an expensive habit to me.

My next interview question attempted to shed light on this aspect of the culture, “Do you ever feel like you spend too much money playing Magic?”

Kelsey rolled her eyes, crossed her arms, and leaned back into the couch and exclaimed, “Yes, but everyone has their own habits, right?”

I found her choice of the word “habit” interesting. I nodded and dug a little further, “Do you think that Magic is addictive?”

She barely hesitated to answer, and jokingly said, “Yeah, kinda like an addiction, but it’s better than heroin, right?” This wasn’t the first time someone told me they thought Magic was addictive. The Magic community is certainly aware of the game’s addictive characteristics, and throughout my time observing this subculture, the players casually joked about this aspect of the game (Kastle, 2012).

Before I could continue the interview with Kelsey, we were interrupted by a loud, panting voice, “Sorry, sorry, sorry...sorry I’m late!”

Kelsey leaned over and said, “I’ll let you two have at it.”

Bragging Rights

I reassured Pedro that his tardiness was no problem at all and after he was settled, I launched into my interview. I asked, “When did you start playing Magic?” This question seemed to interest the other players. Several of the players crept closer to listen to his response. He, like most Magic players, described his start date based on what set of Magic cards was most current when he started playing. This seemed to be a way of establishing status amongst Magic players—the starting set signals how long they have been playing, and gives players bragging rights based on seniority.

“I started with *Ravnica*,” Pedro said proudly. I learned later that this set came out in 2005. Pedro, like most Magic players I’ve met, started playing Magic when he was in middle school. Pedro’s proclamation invited the other players to announce their set start date. As the players bragged about their set start dates, I couldn’t help but wonder how middle school kids had the money to play this expensive game.

Chore Money Well Spent

This curiosity cued my next question, “How did you guys pay for your Magic habit?”

One of the younger players said that he started playing when he was nine years old, and that buying Magic cards was the highlight of his month: “I would use my chore money at the end of the month and basically run to the store.” The others nodded in agreement and went on to tell their own stories about their obsession with Magic cards when they were younger.

I noticed that the conversation was getting a little off topic, so I asked one final question to the group, “Have any of you tried to play professionally?”

One of the older players spoke up: “I have gone to a few larger tournaments, but it became too expensive, so I moved on and grew up.” The others

agreed, and told me that they just couldn't afford to keep up with the "pro-player" lifestyle. This wasn't the first time I have heard a player describe their brief experiences with competitive Magic as a phase out of which they grew. These explanations make sense given conventional wisdom, but I couldn't help but wonder if the idea of "growing up" as opposed to failing wasn't a way of maintaining a grandiose view of themselves (McCain & Campbell, 2015).

Last Call

As the clock ticked closer to draft time, the tournament manager shouted out, "Last call to buy packs and sleeves!" to which the players jokingly cried out in unison, "Last call for alcohol!" It was funny, but it seems like Magic players are always making the same type of joke about how addictive this game really is, from referring to Magic as "cardboard crack" to laughingly justifying it because it's not heroin. While it's obviously true that playing Magic isn't as destructive to the individual or society as a drug addiction, Magic is essentially a "pay-to-play" game, and the constant jokes and references do seem to be a type of preemptive defense mechanism. The players can shut down potential criticism of how much they spend on their hobby by simultaneously acknowledging that it exists, and that there are many other destructive behaviors in which they could be engaging. This serves not only to justify how much they spend on a game, but also elevates them over a drug addict.

This need to elevate oneself is common among Magic players. Players gain status based on how long they have been playing, by the number of effective cards or decks they own, and, of course, by winning. Not only this, but failures are often explained away by having bad luck, or by "growing up." This competition for status carries over even into their conversations; players are always correcting one another, whether it is about effective card combinations, storyline history relating to the game's mythology, or even the proper use of grammar. My impression is that most of these players are not this overblown outside of Friday Night Magic; rather, this is their venue in which they can act out these aspects of their personalities without judgment.

I am certain that Magic: the Gathering is not a highly addictive product ravaging the geek world, but rather that it targets vulnerable demographics and employs tactics which encourage addictive tendencies. Magic is especially attractive to people who want to escape from their lives and fulfill their unmet narcissistic views about themselves. The very nature of the business model, in which cards are sold in random packs alongside a competitive format which continuously phases out older cards, creates a situation in which the consumer must continuously buy cards in order to participate. As mentioned previously, escapism can lead to addictive behaviors, and this link can only be strengthened by this kind of continuous consumption. It could even lead to the kind of obsession that completely consumes a person's life (Kastle, 2012). These observations haven't gone unnoticed by the Magic community: a popular web comic about the game is called "Cardboard Crack," and this is a term I have heard during my observations as well. Rather than treating these addictive tendencies as just a joke, they should be discussed seriously, especially given the links between escapism, narcissism, depression, and neuroticism and engagement in geek culture (McCain & Campbell, 2015).

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