
MAGIC: THE PANACEA FOR GAMERS' NEEDS

SAM HUFFER

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Magic: the Panacea for Gamers' Needs

Upkeep

Originally devised to gather the funds to produce another game (Ashley 2013) and for playing in down-time at conventions (Adkison 2009), *Magic: the Gathering* (Garfield 1993) instead pioneered the trading card game (TCG) genre. Twenty-five years later, *Magic* is still thriving under by Wizards of the Coast (WOTC) despite its competitors, with over twenty million players (Duffy 2015) and billions of cards printed (WOTC 2017a).

In this piece, I shall discuss how *Magic* attracts and retains players by addressing all of Barbaros Bostan's (2009) categories of gamers' needs. *Magic* attracts players with its easy social environment and relatable in-universe characters and groups, eases players into its complexity, and reframes players' desires positively. It retains them by providing a tournament system and regular content with which to attempt to sate their (indestructible) desires.

The Other Players



Figure 1: the card backs of the three major paper TCGs: Pokémon (left) Magic (centre), and Yu-Gi-Oh! (right).

First, however, *Magic*'s competitors. *Magic*'s main TCG competitors are *Pokémon* (Media Factory 1996) and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* (Konami 1999) – both being assisted by their animes (OLM Inc 1997, Studio Gallop and Nihon Ad Systems 2000) – and *Hearthstone* (Blizzard Entertainment 2014). Beyond TCGs, *Magic* fights for attention with videogames like *Fortnite* (Epic Games 2017), *God of War* (SIE Santa Monica Studio 2018), and *Spider-Man* (Insomniac Games 2018).

Welcome to the Family

Bostan defines affiliation as encompassing needs for others' company, cooperation, exchange of views, and friendliness, incorporating needs for affiliation and nurturance (2009, p. 9). Being a two-player plus tabletop game, *Magic* allows social interaction without requiring "formal introduction, etiquette or social construct" (Bigwoodmtg 2009). Players often focus on the game rather than socialising (Hromek and Roffey 2009, pp. 626, 631), which makes socialisation easier for people who consider it boring or useless (Allen 2018), or who struggle but want to socialise (Rosewater 2003a). *Magic* requires everyday social skills (Hromek and Roffey 2009, pp. 626, 631-633) like being able to identify with others' perspectives to anticipate their moves (Cohen 2001, p. 248), and consequently provides the socially challenged with a structured, relaxed, engaging environment within which to nurture their social skills.

Wizards supports multiplayer formats that provide players more opponents (including prospective mentors) to meet and play with in one game, and different social experiences to choose from. Being more casual than Standard and Modern, those that need social or gameric nurturance might find playgroups or regular events like Friday Night Magic (WOTC 2019b) that run casual, multiplayer formats more suitable. Format aside, at events, mingle with players beyond their playgroup who might befriend or mentor newcomers. Those intimidated by such events might instead join online commu-

Format	Play-ers	Deck size	Copies per card	Cards legal	Other
Standard	2	60+	4	Only last five to eight standard-legal sets.	Oldest four sets rotate out when a ninth set would be added to Standard.
Modern				Current or past standard-legal sets from <i>Eighth Edition</i> (WOTC 2003) on-wards.	
Two-Headed Giant	4			All.	Two-on-two.
Conspiracy	3-4	40+		From expansion used.	Free for all. Players take one card from a pack and pass the rest on, repeating for several packs. Decks are built from the cards chosen.
Brawl	2-6	60	1	Standard-legal only.	Free for all. Cards' colours must be within that of the deck's "Commander".
Commander		100		All.	Free for all. Cards' colours must be within that of the deck's "Commander". Designed by players for social multi-player (Commander Rules Committee 2019).

Table 1: Several of *Magic*'s formats (Gamepedia 2019b, WOTC 2016a, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019f, 2019g).

nities centred on their favourite facets of *Magic*, such as groups of vorthosian social media accounts (e.g. Anelli 2019, Mayer 2019, Weisel 2019) or strategy forums (MTG Salvation 2019b).

Furthermore, tabletop games like *Magic* have a social dynamic, physicality and adaptability to players' needs that multiplayer videogames cannot match (Smith 2015). Many millennials, usually surrounded by computers but instead craving reality and socialisation (Jolin 2016, Boycott-Owen 2018), recognise this and use tabletop games to get away from computers, socialize and make new friends (Hillegas 2016, GiftsForCardPlayers.com 2017, Roussey 2018), fuelling a tabletop gaming revival (Boycott-Owen 2018) that can only benefit *Magic*. Additionally, since friendships formed over games will involve more similar interests than not, they'll be more enduring than those formed between people of dissimilar interests (Bigwoodmtg 2009).

Curiouser and Curiouser

Bostan claims people "need information and knowledge as much as . . . social interaction", "to build a comprehensive reference system" and "know their place and that of other objects in the order of things". This category encompasses needs for exposition, understanding and cognizance (to explore, ask questions, and satisfy curiosity) (2009, p. 10). How *Magic* conveys gameric information helps to ease players into *Magic*, and its narrative content sucks them further in.

Learning with Mel

New players have lots to learn but limited working memory to process it (Sweller, van Merriënboer and Paas 1998, p. 252), something *Magic* R&D has to consider when making *Magic* sets. R&D mitigates its impact on beginners' introduction to *Magic*, making it easier to learn using two methods: regulating the volume of complexity beginners encounter with card rarities (Rosewater 2018e), simpler commons and uncommons building them up until they're ready for greater complexity; and designing the cards to convey game information efficiently and effectively.

R&D does this in three ways. The most visible is cards' art. It's matched to cards' types and

Colour	Real-World Connotations	Attributes in <i>Magic</i>
White	Purity, barriers, cleanness, simplicity	Order, morality
Blue	Intelligence, efficiency, logic, coolness, reflection, calm	Logic, rationality, education
Black	Sophisticated, glamorous, oppressive, cold, menacing	Ambition, hunger for power, selfishness, amorality
Red	Physical, warm, energetic, excitement, aggression, defiance	Emotion, action, freedom
Green	Harmony, balance, restoration, environmental awareness, equilibrium	Harmony, nature, natural order and processes

Table 2: existing connotations of colours (Groenholm, pp. 3-5) and those colours' attributes in *Magic* (Rosewater 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d, 2015e).

particular abilities, and made consistent across a setting yet distinguishable from a distance (Rosewater 2003b, 2019c) so that players can associate a card's information with its art, the art prompting recall of the card's workings from long-term memory.

The art also contributes to the second: interweaving flavour and mechanics to make cards highly resonant whether they're designed top-down or bottom-up (Rosewater 2018c), leveraging players' existing understanding of words and the card's non-diegetic basis to convey its effects (Rosewater 2019f). *Magic's* colours exemplify this: their characteristics align with each colour's real-world tropes and connotations (Rosewater 2019f), ensuring players receive the designers' intent with as little information escaping the designers' signification of it as possible (Neiva and Romano 2007, p. 47, Bailly 2009, pp. 91, 94, 98).

Lastly, R&D shields beginners from complexity that would overwhelm them using lenticular design. Beginners lack the prerequisite skills and knowledge to perceive the complexity of lenticular cards, but as that gap closes, recognise strategic complexity better, discovering options that weren't apparent before (Rosewater 2012, 2014b), providing experienced players greater potential depth of exploration.

Snack-Time with Vorthos

While players are easing themselves into *Magic's* gameplay, they'll also be exploring it's worlds, storyline, and characters and groups they can identify (Cohen 2001, p. 247) with. Most prominent are *Magic's* characters – especially planeswalkers – that players enjoy and empathise with. But *Magic* also features groups that players might say “I belong to this group” rather than “I am a player” (or fan), drawing diegetic elements into their social and operative contexts (Conway and Trevillian 2015). One metagroup players identify with are *Magic's* colours. They're defined in such a way that one can visualise them as characters and identify with them – indeed they have been presented as such before (Rosewater 2014a, 2014c, 2014d, 2015g, 2015h). Those unsure of their colour identity have articles and charts they can refer to, as well as online quizzes that can “sort” them (*Welcome To The Color Quiz!*). Another meta-group are the factions of *Magic's* worlds, like Ravnica's guilds (Gamepedia 2019d) and Alara's shards (Gamepedia 2019f). They often portray particular interpretations of colour combinations, and are designed with empathisability in mind (Rosewater 2018a).

In each case, players are given characters and ideals that they can identify with – and perhaps emulate (Cohen 2001, p. 249). Such identification would be importance mode (Roccas et al 2008, p.



Figure 2: *Magic's* colours, with each's attributes and philosophies briefly summarised.

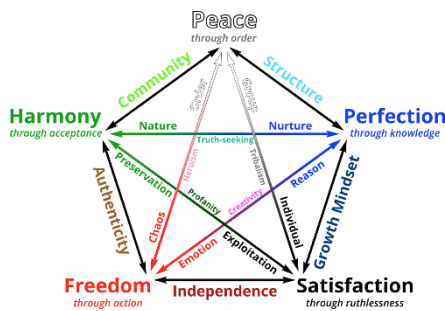


Figure 3: the philosophical cores of Magic's colours (vertexes), as well as opposite colours' disagreements (pentagram lines), and the core of each two-colour identity (the exterior and interior pentagons' edges). For example, red and blue disagree on following emotion or using reason, but when they come together, they embody creativity.

apprehension for a group and recognise and accept its attributes within themselves. Nonetheless, anyone thinking that deeply about *Magic's* meta-groups has certainly been drawn by the game.

A Certain Point of View

To return to reframing (Pesut 1991, p. 10), *Magic* provides a lens to reframe players stigmatised – perhaps id (Freud 2001, pp. 73-74) – desires, allowing them out of the shadow to find expression in players' personae (Watts 2004, pp. 129-130). It reframes desires' content for existing players and providing a context for newcomers where those desires are acceptable (Pesut 1991, pp. 10, 14), making them comfortable in using *Magic* as an outlet for those desires. Players are not viewed as nerds who read too much and obsess over game details; they're part of the Vorthos community, or are Mels who appreciate the craft of design, even aspiring to become game designers (Rosewater 2015f). They aren't players whose win rate is prohibitively high, but professional *Magic* players demonstrating their skill and inspiring and entertaining others. They're not greedy or materialistic, but appreciative collectors, or players composing fun decks. And they're not just playing (Koh et al 2012, p. 52, Leonardo 2015), they're learning resource management (Risendragon 2019) and new vocabulary (HateBear 2009, White-fangs 2018), practicing maths (Jostin123 2014, Leonardo 2015), and building up statistical intuition, physical stamina and body-language reading skills (Chalk 2017, p. 148).

Players motivated by material or power needs especially benefit from reframing their needs. Exerting power is viewed unfavourably yet is a positive emotional experience (Bostan 2009, p. 8). Meanwhile, materialism is frowned upon (van Boven 2005, p. 136), "characterised as an addictive drug" for materialistic individuals (Richins 1987), and considered overemphasised in American culture and a lesser source of pleasure than experiences (van Boven 2005, pp. 132-134). However, *Magic* cards aren't strictly utilitarian or material; they can facilitate enjoyable experiences (p. 134) with friends (Hillegas 2016, GiftsForCardPlayers.com 2017, Roussey 2018).

I don't care how; I want it now!

Magic gathering new players is insufficient, however; it must retain them in order to prosper. Fortunately for *Magic*, benefits from players' Lacanian desires (Petry and Hernandez 2010, p. 67): though *Magic* might be an outlet for them, they will remain in the player's unconscious, indestructible. Players will seek to assuage them with new content, but will never be satisfied.

For example, for affiliation-driven players, there are always weekly Friday Night Magic events or regular meetups with playgroups, plus influxes of irregular players when new sets debut (Martin 2019). Those driven by information needs have reams of content available on the *Magic* wiki

(Gamepedia 2019c), *Blogatog* (Rosewater 2019a), and strategy forums and articles (MTG Salvation 2019b, Channel Fireball 2019). Wizards' preview season marketing campaigns for new sets – spanning the *Magic* website (Rosewater 2019b) and employees' (Beyer 2019), fan's (The Vorthos Cast 2019) and news outlets' (Marks 2019, Pastimes 2019) social media accounts – will whet players' appetites. Simultaneously, Wizards publishes new *Magic* story content, design articles (WOTC 2019e), and questions articles (Rosewater 2018d, 2019d) and podcasts (Gamepedia 2019a). Players will absorb the new experience and content, yet remain eager for the next chapter meetup, their desire unsatisfied. This also applies to players' material, achievement, power and sensual needs, all of which *Magic* addresses.

Cardboard Crack

Bostan (2009, p. 8) describes “acquisition of objects and the accompanying sense of possession” and “psychological ownership” as being “among the basic constructs of human psychology”, encompassing acquisition and retention within materialism. As the first TCG, *Magic* meets these needs easily, with 19426 unique cards, twenty billion printed between 2008 and 2016 (WOTC 2017a, 2019c), and more released regularly; *War of the Spark* (2019h) is the 81st and latest standard-legal expansion (Gamepedia 2019g). Wizards recognises *Magic*'s collectability – it didn't earn the moniker “cardboard crack” (Scattercat 2005) for nothing (Martin 2019) – and takes further steps to attract collectors (Rosewater 2004). Sets also sometimes miss characters added to the story after they're finalised (Rosewater 2018d, 2019d), leaving collectors' desires unsated and giving Wizards holes they can later fill to retain or recover players.

Beyond the sets released during a collector's engagement with *Magic*, collectors may also collect older, more valuable cards of interest – if they have sufficient desire and enough desire compelling them. The *Black Lotus* epitomises such cards: one sold for \$166,100 USD (Hall 2019), its originality (Beier-de Haan 2011, pp. 1, 3) and scarcity augmenting its value: in *Alpha* (WOTC 1993a), only 1100 were printed (Plunkett 2013). Besides *Beta* (WOTC 1993b) and *Unlimited Edition* (1993c), no set ever reprinted them thanks to the Reserved List (2016b). Created in 1996 (Gamepedia 2019e) in response to outcry from collectors about the loss of value of their cards following the release of *Chronicles* (WOTC 1995), it lists cards Wizards has promised to never reprint (Rosewater 2013). It is hated by many players (Rosewater 2004, 2013, Andres 2012, Guillermin 2016) and nearly all of R&D (Andres 2012). Yet it remains, placing some cards out of most collectors' reach, ensuring they'll never achieve satisfaction or will spend fortunes trying. For the rest, as new sets fill their collections, they will have to content themselves with becoming attached to particular cards over their art, emotive association, or power, rather than age or excessive value.



Figure 4: A Black Lotus from *Alpha* (WOTC).

Straight to the Top

Bostan defines power needs as being visible to or exerting influence over others, and having high status, including in this category aggression, counteraction, dominance, and deference (2009, p. 8). He defines achievement needs as the desire to take moderately difficult actions that result in concrete outcomes measurable in terms of standards of quality or quantity, and in it encompasses achievement, recognition, exhibition, and harm avoidance. (p. 9). The two overlap in how *Magic* satisfies them, so I shall discuss them together.

Magic's gameplay serves as an outlet for power needs, whether they're ultimately sated or



Figure 5: left to right, a lockdown-, counter-, and destruction-spell.

establish dominance (Rosewater 2006); such play is supplemented by sideboarding countermeasures for popular strategies, which also engenders a sense of harm avoidance, an achievement need.

Players have several ways to gain recognition and cultural capital (Bourdieu 2011, p. 82) within *Magic's* fan-base. High-performing tournament players that get sufficient reputation are sometimes recruited by R&D, as professional players tend to have the skills it needs (Buehler 2003, LaPille 2010). Streaming *Arena* matches (e.g. CovertGoBlue2019), top-tier or otherwise, also affords one opportunity to sate their need for recognition, particularly if an informal community forms around watching them stream (Hamilton, Garretson and Kerne 2014, p. 1). This brings more fans preferring watching streamers play games over playing them themselves (Kaytoue et al 2012, p. 1) into contact with *Magic*, possibly enticing some to begin playing.

Once begun, players of all kinds will find in *Magic* purposely designed means (Rosewater 2009a, 2009b, 2009c) to strive for achievement, which is important for optimal functioning (Deci and Ryan 2008, p. 183). Power, adrenalin, and griever Txmmies can build decks to maximise their chosen visceral thrill. Jxnies will seek cards daring them to solve how to build a deck around them to demonstrate to others (Rosewater 2006). Within Wizards' tournament structure – the highest tier being its Mythic Championships (Chase 2018, WOTC 2019d) – Spikes (Rosewater 2015c) can demonstrate their skills and prove their dominance. In pursuing achievement, players might experience flow (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2014, p. 230), which itself is rewarding. But it will never be enough; there'll always be new creatures to attack with, new combos to uncover, new decks to dominate with.



Figure 6: Arena animations and gameplay.

Spectacular Play



Figure 7: cosplays of Jace (top), Chandra (left) and Nissa (right).

Lastly, Bostan defines sensual needs as seeking "satisfaction in exciting stimuli or experience", and includes the needs for play and sentence (i.e. to seek and enjoy sensuous impressions) (2009, p. 10).

Magic affords a number of avenues to satisfy one's sensuous desires. Art fans and artist Vorthoses (Tessitore 2015) will find particular sensual value in *Magic* cards' high-quality artwork, perhaps prompting them to collect it. Fans can also enjoy the cosplays of

others, even participate themselves (Spartz 2017) if they wish to express themselves uniquely (Rosewater 2006) or bring *Magic* into ordinary reality (Conway and Trevillian 2015, Tessitore 2015). (The latter would also address affiliation needs of (especially younger) fans who see their favourite characters brought to life and want to meet them (Spartz 2017).) For the less sociable, *Arena*'s (WOTC 2017b) constantly evolving graphics, animations and voice acting (compare IGN 2017 versus CovertGoBlue 2019) offer a more accessible (Risendragon 2019) and relaxed experience through both one's gameplay and others' streams.

As a game, play-ers can play *Magic*, particularly casually, for relaxation, amusement and entertainment. Casual games also give players greater opportunity than competitive *Magic* to access *Magic*'s in-built narrative equity and make weird, awesome plays that become enduring stories (Rosewater 2018b) that inspire the desire to start or continue engaging in such experiences with friends.

End Step

Twenty-five years old, *Magic* continues to excite and entertain players worldwide. Whether one views it as better or worse than its TCG cousins or videogame rivals, one cannot deny that it is thriving and will likely continue doing so for some time. Some may attribute this to its strengths in drawing players in, others to how it keeps them engaged and craving more. Either way, *Magic* and the content produced by its designers and fans continue to address its players' needs and desires, and will continue to be iterated and refined to better captivate them, ensuring its longevity.

Magic-ese Glossary

Colour: *Magic* cards are split amongst five colours, and can be one or several colours, or colourless. To cast a card of a given colour, one must be able to pay mana of that colour. Each colour and colour combination has its own philosophy and characteristics attributed to it, and its own playstyle, strengths and weaknesses.

Format: a variant of *Magic* with particular rules for deck construction and how to go about playing *Magic* (SEE TABLE).

Jxnny (m: Johnny, f: Jenny): the psychographic profile of *Magic* players who want to express something (Rosewater 2006). Includes the sub-types of:

- **Combo Players:** stereotypical Jxnny; Jxnnies that want to find combos and interactions between cards that no one else has.
- **Offbeat Designers:** Jxnnies that build decks around whacky ideas, rather than being driven by card interactions.
- **Deck Artists:** Jxnnies that use deck building as self-expressive art.
- **Uber Jxnnies:** Jxnnies that seek to prove conventional wisdom about deck building or what cards are usable, wrong; that seek to prove the impossible possible.

Lenticular design: a design technique where some of a card's complexity is hidden from beginners, such that they need to acquire certain skills and knowledge to be able to perceive it. Lenticular cards appear simple and easy for beginners, but have more strategic depth for advanced players (Rosewater 2014a).

Magic R&D: the section of Wizards of the Coast responsible for designing the *Magic* sets Wizards releases. R&D encompasses the following teams (Rosewater 2017) amongst others:

- **Vision Design:** a set's vision design team is responsible for what the mechanical focus of the set's world is going to be.
- **Set Design:** a set's set design team is responsible for taking vision design's plans and filling out the set.
- **Play Design:** a set's play design team is responsible for ensuring that set won't disrupt tournament environments and will be as enjoyable as possible.

Mel (m: Melvin; f: Melanie): the aesthetic profile of *Magic* fans that appreciate the craft of designing cards and mechanical elegance (Rosewater 2015f).

Narrative equity: the idea that people will give weight to choices based upon the ability to later tell a story about it, and the extent to which games allow players to make such choices (Rosewater 2018b).

Sideboard: *noun:* a 15-card deck separate from a *Magic* player's main deck, from which players can exchange cards into their main deck between games in a three-game match as long as each has the same number of cards at the end; *verb:* to put a card(s) in one's sideboard when building a deck.

Spike: the psychographic profile of *Magic* players that play to prove something (Rosewater 2006). Includes the sub-types of:

- **Innovators:** Spikes that judge new cards and want to find the next over-powered thing, to create the next dominant deck.
- **Tuners:** min/maxer Spikes that seek to dominate by perfecting known decks.
- **Analysts:** Spikes that seek to dominate by analysing their expected competition, and using a deck best suited for that environment.
- **Nuts & Bolts:** Spikes that seek to perfect their own gameplay.

Txummy (m: Timmy, f: Tammy): the psychographic profile of *Magic* players that play to experience something (Rosewater 2006). Includes the sub-types of:

- **Power Gamers:** Txummy stereotype; love playing big creatures and big spells to beat their opponent down with.
- **Social Gamers:** Txummies that play for the social aspect of *Magic*.
- **Diversity Gamers:** Txummies that enjoy *Magic's* variety and are constantly exploring new cards and strategies.
- **Adrenalin Gamers:** Txummies that enjoy *Magic's* variance, such as coin-flip cards or cards that work differently each time they're used.
- **Griefers Txummies:** Txummies that enjoy making their opponents miserable (LaPille 2009).

Vorthos: the aesthetic profile of *Magic* fans that appreciate the flavour of cards and the game as a whole (Rosewater 2015f). Includes the sub-groups of (Tessitore 2015):

- **The Gamer:** appreciates resonant, top-down (flavour-based) cards and decks.
- **The Artist:** appreciates *Magic's* visuals, most commonly the card art.
- **The Writer:** appreciates what is written for *Magic*, focusing on good writing rather than *Magic's* storyline.
- **The Oracle:** wants to create ways to bridge the gap between normal reality and *Magic's* fiction, most commonly through cosplay.
- **The Dreamer:** appreciates *Magic* content that adds to its overall storyline.

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