

One game, two guys, many ideas

The History of *Legends*

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By now, people interested in **Magic: The Gathering** know its history, they know the name Richard Garfield, and they know the card game changed the face of gaming. The concept behind the **Magic: The Gathering** expansion *Legends* began way back in the early '90s when Wizards of the Coast was still operating out of Peter Adkison's basement. The base concepts and many of the cards were designed before **Magic** was released... Wait! I'm getting ahead of myself.

My name is Steve Conard and I'm one of five founders of Wizards of the Coast and co-designer of the **Magic: The Gathering** expansion *Legends*. It sounds a lot more impressive than it really is -- be assured of that. My friends and I have always loved games -- we're probably no different than countless millions of other gamers around the globe. In high school, we attended private boarding academies and excelled at exchanging sleep for the pursuit of gaming excellence. After graduation, we found ourselves at the same college; we majored in game entertainment with minors in game design (not really, but it sure felt like it). Class scores in studies unrelated to games suffered tremendously. School loans mounted. Games would either be our salvation or our ruin. We eventually forced our way through college. (The story of our college careers is an entirely different beast that should be left for a different time.)

Steve Conard, looking quite legendary himself, and some of his creations: Magnus, Vaevictus, Ur-Drago, and Sol'kanar.

A couple of years after college, we ended up in Seattle. Peter suggested we create a game company and put to use the skills we'd developed. We'd spent so much time designing and redesigning our own game campaigns and settings, so it only made sense that we did so. It was our goal to create the best games possible and introduce a whole new generation of people to gaming. Soon we were kicking out games, but we'd been struggling with acquiring new concepts. Wizards had already released *The Primal Order* and we were focusing our attention on the role-playing game *Talisanta*. During this time, Richard Garfield was introduced to Peter and they began working on a game concept that would eventually become **Magic**.

In 1991, I married a wonderful Canadian gal and moved to Vancouver, B.C. Canada. While working for a software company, I met Robin Herbert. Living in a new country was odd and I wasn't enjoying it all that much; I missed my lifelong friends in Seattle. When I met Robin, we immediately hit it off. We were both young software developers, we loved computer games, and were both avid **Dungeons &**

Dragons players. Meeting Robin came exactly at the right time; we soon became good friends -- a friendship that continues today.

I continued to work on freelance projects for Wizards, which meant an occasional trip to Seattle. One day while I was at Wizards, Peter introduced me to little cards with funny images; they were photocopied two-inch squares. Peter quickly gave me a synopsis of the game. I remember thinking it was an interesting concept, but that was about it -- I didn't give it much thought. In the following months I heard more and more ramblings about the card game -- all of the Wizards folk were carrying on about how cool the game was.

Soon I made another trip to Seattle. This time I took Robin with me. He had voiced an interest in meeting Peter and the gang at Wizards. He, too, had aspirations to publish games. Sure, Wizards was small, but it was an intriguing proposition to meet people who had actually designed and sold games. So off to Seattle we went. Little did we know what a profound effect the trip would have on our lives.

The day we arrived, Peter had just received the latest playtest decks from Richard. It was lunchtime, so we grabbed a bundle of cards and went to our favorite greasy spoon. For the next hour and a half we leaned over the table focusing our attention on the cards, and the world around us disappeared. We were hooked. Watching Robin's response, I knew the game was special. For the rest of the weekend we played as many games as we could. George Lowe had the best deck; he'd been hoarding cards and wouldn't allow anyone to touch them. Even in its raw form, it created passion that boiled over into hunger, a hunger that could not be quenched. Peter's enthusiastic demeanor said it all -- the game was magic.

By the end of the weekend, the game had us in its grips. Our minds were awl with possibilities. Like other people who enjoy **Magic**, we immediately began dreaming up new cards and cool effects and powers. The company as of yet didn't have a plan for the game. Peter is a great motivator and encouraged Robin and I to continue thinking and dreaming about possibilities for the game. The two of us returned to Vancouver with cards in our pockets with our imaginations running wild.

At first, we didn't have a clue as to what we were doing. Magic was complicated and we didn't have an understanding of the philosophies of the game and how the colors interacted, but our excitement and enthusiasm spurred us on. We played the game constantly and began writing down ideas -- ideas that were raw and unfocused. The two little test decks we had were too limiting so Peter sent us up an entire card set. Oh yum! We began building decks and soon people all over the software company were playing the game. It was addictive. The ideas began to flow. We used a software program called Coreldraw to duplicate cards and to make new ones. Soon we had loads of cards -- cards created by Richard and cards designed by ourselves. The work we did was all for fun, it wasn't like we had a contract or were being paid for it. It was just for fun.

A few months later Wizards planned a Christmas recreational outing to Mount Rainier. Peter worked for Boeing and he'd arranged to use a Boeing owned lodge. Robin and I were invited and we brought with us a bunch of Robin's longtime friends. We rented an eleven-passenger van and went on a road trip. The lodge was buried in snowdrifts. Stuck inside, we spend three solid days playing **Magic**. It was awesome. We talked **Magic** the entire time -- from the time we left Vancouver, the whole weekend,

and back again. I wrote down notes on every suggestion. It was the notes from that weekend that became the basis for *Legends*.

Robin and I continued to work on the set, working at our own pace, getting together on a casual basis -- we were not in a hurry. It wasn't like we had a contract or anything. Remember, we were doing this for fun. Then one Friday evening I received a call from Peter. He asked how the *Legends* set was going. I told him everything was going fine, and then came the shock of my life. He and a few other people wanted to review it. He then went on to ask if I could bring it down to Seattle the next day. Yes, of course! What I didn't tell him was that it was only in electronic format. I raced to work. I was the Director of the IS department at a native government. They had the computing power I needed. Since no one worked the weekends, I had full access to the entire network. The files I had created were massive and it took hours for them to print. I set up a print spooler and sent the files to every laser printer I could find. Hoping that there wouldn't be any problems, I went home. Early the next morning I drove to work praying every was fine. Oh, thank God, every file printed correctly. I snatched them up and off to Seattle I went.

Computer printouts, playing cards, and paste: Legends in its infancy.

I arrived at Peter's home around noon. It was a glorious sunny day, not a cloud in the sky -- this was in Seattle, remember. Grabbing a Diet Coke from the pop refrigerator, (a shrine to Coke -- sorry, inside joke) I went out to the patio and handed the folder to Peter. He and Lisa Stevens began review the documents. Lisa was the first Wizards employee, not including the founders. I held my breath as they turned each page. After some time I got the response I was hoping for. They loved it. Peter, right then and there, made the executive decision. *Legends* was to be a **Magic: The Gathering** expansion. We immediately drew up a contract.

Peter explained some challenges they were having with the next expansion that was scheduled to be produced -- *Ice Age*. Originally, *Ice Age* was to be released after *Antiquities*, but there was an issue. Early on, Richard believed it was okay for full-sized expansions (which *Ice Age* and *Legends* were) to reprint the common cards from the original *Alpha* set. In fact, Robin and I had met with Richard on a few occasions to discuss design philosophy. He had told us it was okay to use the commons from the original set, just to make up new uncommons and rares. He had said it was *okay* to do this, but wasn't a requirement; we had the option to create all new commons. We chose to create all new cards; the designers of *Ice Age* did not. Soon after **Magic** was released, Wizards realized their flawed thinking. The fans of **Magic** were consumed with obtaining new cards. They would not be pleased with all-rehashed common cards, considering a booster is mostly common. Therefore, the decision was made to postpone *Ice Age* until more common cards could be created and *Legends* was placed on the schedule. *Ice Age* ended up reprinting a handful of "staple" commons in addition to many new ones, a practice still used today for stand-alones.

Shortly after that, I was introduced to Skaff Elias. Skaff was what we referred to as an "East Coast Playtester" and was a good friend of Richard Garfield. Skaff and his group of college cohorts had assisted Richard with the original **Magic** set, and his group had also designed *Antiquities*, *Ice Age*, and eventually went on to design just about every expansion ever printed and they continue to design even now. One weekend Skaff and Peter came to Vancouver to discuss *Legends*. A design and playtest

system needed to be established. Skaff was to be the liaison between our design team and the playtest group in Philadelphia. I'll never forget the first weekend I met him; Skaff had me in stitches almost the entire time. I swear, he should be a stand up comic. He has a wonderfully cynical view of the world that I appreciate immensely. It's a good thing I liked the man because remarks from playtesters are not always kind. It's a necessary evil of game design: if you want a great game, it needs to be tested. Looking back on it now, with time as a buffer, I have a better appreciation for the process. At the time we felt bad, because it seemed like we only received disparaging remarks -- it was almost like the playtesters were incapable of saying something nice. It was painful. But, you know what, if you want a world-class game, you need the playtesters dissecting it. I can't thank them enough. In 1994, *Legends* won the GAMA Award for best game accessory of the year. Thanks Skaff!

Legendary Qualities

Robin and I are lifelong fans of **Dungeons & Dragons**; both of us began playing in the 70's. It's safe to say that our **D&D** experience had a significant role in the look and feel of *Legends*.

Our partnership was excellent; as a team our design personalities counterbalanced each other well. We both filled important roles. He was the calming influence, while I was the out of control, power-amping, epic storyteller. It's important to understand my personality -- I love to be wowed by extreme scale and larger-than-life heroic tales. I've always enjoyed the epic stories found in mythology: the battle of Ragnarok between the Norse gods and the giants, Hercules' quests, the battle between Beowulf and the dragon and the song of Roland. I love the works of Michael Moorcock, especially Elric of Melnibone and his conflict with law and chaos and his struggles with the black sword Stormbringer. Those epics captured the feeling I wanted to bring to *Legends* -- one of ancient unknown entities, Elder Dragons and cosmic powers. When I pitch a concept, I bring it all -- I hold nothing back. Robin would take the base concept and simmer it down to a manageable idea. If it weren't for him, I would have really gone off the deep end. I'd submit cards for review and he'd respond, "Jeez, Steve, you've got to be kidding, we can't do that." Or, "Oh my God, that's way too powerful." After many heated debates, we'd eventually comprise and rework cards. I think our personalities were a perfect mixture which helped create a wonderful product.

While brainstorming and kicking around new ideas, we soon found ourselves thinking about completely new types of cards, not just new powers. Heroes were the first concept we focused on. Richard had created mysterious and wonderful creatures. It was clear, however, that his creatures were of species and that there were multitudes of them. There wasn't anything unique in the game. More importantly, there weren't any true heroes either. There was no Conan, no Han Solo, or anyone like them. The game needed heroes. Richard already had a card called "hero" (later renamed [Benalish Hero](#)), so we called them "Legends."

The *Legends* set was intended to be more than just epic heroes, it was about legendary places and legendary creatures. It's understood in magic that creatures are a species and thus there are multitudes of them. While the creatures in *Legends* also fall into this category, we wanted them to be more than the common fantasy faire; more than just elves and dwarves; these creatures were to invoke the feeling of vast age and primal forces. Good examples of these are [Hell's Caretaker](#), [Cosmic Horror](#), [Elder Spawn](#), and [Evil Eye of Orms-By-Gore](#).

We pulled heavily from our **D&D** campaigns, which we had spent years developing. Most of the legend characters are based on player characters and non-player characters from our personal campaigns. I

also drew from concepts I designed years early, such as [Presence of the Master](#), which is a deity's sphere of influence (needless to say, I was a little miffed when I saw the card art depicted Albert Einstein). The [Elder Dragons](#) are fan favorites and they were concepts I borrowed from Peter Adkison. The primordial dragons in the *Primal Order: Pawns* game are in essence also Elder Dragons; both sets of dragons came from the same base idea.

In one of the many emails from Skaff, he said we needed more Legendary characters. Finally, a request that was easily remedied! I went through my campaign notes and began pulling character names. In a matter of moments, we had a long list. It was suggested that I also include my personal player character, but Wizards frowned upon vanity publishing and so I decided against it. Too many people knew my characters and it would have put me in an embarrassing situation. On the other hand, no one knew Robin's **D&D** character or any of the other player characters from his campaign and so they were included -- [Ramirez DePietro](#), [Ramses Overdark](#), [Marhault Elsdragon](#).

*Robin Herbert, the other designer of Legends. Robin's **D&D** character made it into the set as the swashbuckling Ramirez DiPietro.*

Besides actual Legend cards we also developed the Enchant World cards. Their concept was established around the idea that dueling sorcerers of Dominia have such vast powers that they are able to change the scope of the battle. When an Enchant World spell is cast, the entire battle area is then transported to another plane of existence where the laws of physics may not be in harmony with Dominia, thus the change. (For example, a world with heavy gravity would not allow creatures to fly).

The original name of the expansion was *The Legends Continue*; this was an attempt to pay homage to the original set. However, people kept shortening the name to *Legends*. During the course of conversations, it was continuously referred to as *Legends*, and eventually it stuck. It's a good thing too; the first name wasn't that hot.

Legends was a great project to work on. If I had a chance to do it over again there are definitely things I would change -- casting costs of Legend characters, [Wood Elemental](#), and few others. But overall it was a pretty darn good effort.

Comments about the article (or the set)? Email editor@wizards.com.