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**Making Magic** Monday, April 22, 2002

## R&D R&R

### What the game guys do for fun



Mark Rosewater

I love my job. I get paid to play and make games. Pretty damn cool. But there is one other perk about working in R&D that I wanted to talk about today. And that perk is R&D itself.

Flashback to my childhood. I was a bit of a social outcast in my youth; I didn't exactly have a wealth of friends. In fact, a story my parents like to tell is about the time I had a friend they didn't like. They didn't have the heart to keep him away from me because he was my only friend.

Every time I would bemoan this fact, my mother would always say to me, "I know it might not seem this way now. But someday when you're older, you'll see that there are a lot of people out there like yourself. You'll find these people and that's who you'll spend time with."

Intelligent people with a good sense of humor. People who like talking about all sorts of things and who enjoy the same topics you do. Playful people whose idea of entertainment is sitting around playing games. In short, R&D.



R&D at work: Mark, Mike Donais, David Eckleberry, and Skaff Elias work through a new TCG.

## Chair Hockey and Other Late Night Sports

When I first arrived in R&D back in the fall of 1995, R&D was a little different than it is today. At the time, everyone (except Richard Garfield) was single and our social circle was restricted to one another. This meant that we worked crazy hours spending twenty plus hours a day in the building. The real fun was late at night when we would go to one of the abandoned parts of the building (we had just moved into a new building and there was substantial unused space) and play various sports we would invent.

My favorite sport was one we called chair hockey. Here's how it worked. First we would go to some section of the company and borrow office chairs (with wheels, of course). Then we would go into the largest empty room in the building. This room would later become the "all hands" room where we had company-wide meetings. Each of us was then given a hockey stick. (Those we brought with us.) Finally, there was a small rubber ball (a racquetball, I think) and two goals made with whatever random objects we could find.

Each team had three to five members depending on how many people we picked up for that night, one of which the goalie. Then each person sat in a chair and the hockey game began. The rules were simple. Score a goal, get a point. Hockey sticks could only touch chairs, the ball, and other hockey sticks. And that was it.

Very early on we mastered the technique of body checking other players with your chair. As a result the two greatest injuries were accidentally being hit by a hockey stick and being body checked out of your chair. I don't remember exactly what ended those late night sports although I do know that on more than one occasion we got a talking-to from the guy in charge of building maintenance.

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## Always Board, Never Bored

Another big favorite was the playing of games. Richard Garfield has a huge collection of games that is constantly growing. Many nights were spent playing the latest game that Richard had acquired. A popular source of games is Germany where gaming rivals the movies for entertainment. If you've never checked out any of the German imports I highly recommend it as Germany has many of the best game designers in the world.

Other nights were spent playing old favorites many of which we put our own spin on. One of the interesting things is how different members have mastered different types of games. As a writer, for instance, I tended to excel at word games. Mike Elliott, for example, is a former bridge player who excels at bidding games. Bill Rose, the head of all of Wizards of the Coast R&D, has an uncanny ability to play trick-taking games.



*Bill Rose, Vice President of Research & Development, and Acquire hustler.*

R&D goes to every day. (For some of us the waitress no longer bothers to ask our order.)

One final story before I move on is about a game called skitgubbe (pronounced "skit gooba"). Skitgubbe is a card game that Richard picked up many years ago. I don't have the ability to explain the game here but in a nutshell, the goal of the game is not to be the last guy with cards in his hand. If you do, you have to make the sound of a goat. No, really. The game is quite complex. In fact one of the R&D guys, Robert Gutschera, spent months writing up the rules which are [here](#) if you're interested. (A quick warning that this explanation, while good, is not complete.) As a rite of passage, each new R&D member is taught the game. Most of them believe we are playing a practical joke on them. The real joke though is that we're actually serious.

## Computers Are Our Forte

While R&D has a warm spot for traditional board games, we are also fans of computer games (I'm using the term "we" in the same way a nurse does, as I am one of the sole holdouts when it comes to computer games.) With a computer network at our disposal, (in a room called The Lab) we have the ability to play multi-player games with up to eight people.

While the game in favor keeps changing, (past R&D favorites have included: *WarCraft*, *Heroes of Might and Magic*, *Diablo*, *StarCraft*, *EverQuest*, and *Progress Quest* among others) the late night games continue. One of my favorite stories is about a former R&D member named

One of my favorite stories from the late nights of game playing was the time when William Jockusch brought in the game [Acquire](#). Acquire, many of us knew, was one of Bill's favorite games. As one would expect, Bill is somewhat of an Acquire shark. So when Bill saw the box, he innocently asked William, "So how do you play this?"

Bill then sat quietly through a short explanation of the rules. "That sounds fun," Bill said, "Let's play."

The best part about this was that everyone other than William was aware of Bill's prowess at Acquire. This added an extra level to the game. As the game progressed, Bill started dropping hints that this wasn't his first time playing. Even though Bill kept ramping up his comments, William never caught on. Bill smashed everyone as expected and at the game's end he said to William, "This was fun. We should play again sometime."

Unlike chair hockey, the game playing continues today although not in the volume of the old days. The most popular time to play these days is during lunch where the latest game is played out at the local restaurant

Shawn Carnes (the man, incidentally, who coined the phrase “Bad Touch” which was anagrammed to name the card **Chub Toad**). Shawn discovered that he was about to max out his vacation time meaning that he would be throwing away vacation days. So, Shawn took a week’s vacation... in The Lab.



*The Lab: Empty now, but wait until work is over...*

## Discuss Amongst Yourself

Another popular pastime of R&D is arguing. Now, you have to understand that one of the skills we look for when hiring in R&D is the ability to argue a point. This means that R&D is filled with people that enjoy and are relatively good at arguing. Most times these skills are used for good to improve the game of **Magic**. In fact, much of R&D’s time is spent arguing over the most mundane of **Magic** minutiae.

Often though our arguments have nothing to do with **Magic**. Jim Lin (the former head of R&D and currently the boss of Bill Rose, the current head of R&D) and Skaff Elias (creator of the Pro Tour) hold the current R&D record. I forget what the argument was about and I don’t know exactly how long it lasted. But I do remember watching part of the argument, going home, sleeping, waking up, and returning to work to see them in the same spot continuing the argument.

Probably the most fun thing about these arguments is that they can be about the silliest of topics. To give you a sampling, here are some of the more recent R&D topics to be argued about:

- If you could be the tenth best in the world at any one sport, what sport would it be?
- If you discovered that you were born with two additional fully working arms and you’re parents removed them, would you be upset at them?
- What are the five best time travel movies of all time?
- If you could trade 1 point of IQ for an inch of vertical leap, how much would you trade in?
- What is the best non-animated, filmed in color, sitcom of all time?
- If aliens came down and offered you the cure for cancer for all the gold in the world, would you take the offer? (For the sake of this question, you were speaking for the world.)
- What is the best *Star Wars* movie? (Or more accurately, Which is better, *Star Wars* or *The Empire Strikes Back*?) This led to a tangential argument: Which is the greater invention, shoes or shoelaces? (Skaff’s memorable quote: “What are shoelaces without shoes? Just string!”)

An interesting note is that this last section took me over an hour to write as each question I brought up caused R&D to rehash the argument. This led to a new argument: what is the most serious question on that list?

## Did You Know?

When R&D is not arguing, it’s discussing things. This led to another favorite pastime: lying. This isn’t just any kind of lying but rather sort of a game that involves lying. This game was invented, although more out of goofing off than any conscious thought, by Richard. Here’s how it works. Come up with an outrageous lie. Something completely unbelievable. Then try to see if you can get someone to believe it. This is best accomplished when you create a lie in response to a question asked by another R&D member. Here is a sampling of some of the more outrageous lies, most of which were believed by someone (and yes, Richard is responsible for most of them):

- A shark ate a cow after flooding (in central Oregon)
- A certain style of dog was bred in Portugal to catch low flying birds, primarily chickens
- The airline flight they were about to take was a karaoke flight
- Polar bears are technically a type of weasel
- The dachshund was bred as a two-person lap dog
- A piece of egg-shaped sidewalk chalk was a giant Sweettart
- At 2:00 on their first day, all R&D members must stand up on their chair and sing “New York, New York” (This one was successfully used on Henry Stern on his first day.)

This is just a sampling of some of the fun we have in R&D. While it's not about **Magic** directly, I hope it gives you a little insight into the people that make the game.

Join me next week as we begin looking behind the scenes of *Judgment*.


Until then, may you believe only what is true and not have to make a goat noise.

Mark Rosewater

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