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# Collecting My Thoughts



*Mark Rosewater · Making Magic  
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## Collecting and Magic

hello. Before I continue, I'd kindly ask that you read this column until at least the end of this paragraph. After that, feel free to move on to [Scott Will's column](#) (which is very good, by the way, if you are at all interested in limited play). So what am I talking about that I'm worried will drive readers away? Collecting. Today's column is going to talk about the impact of collecting on the making of **Magic**. At this point I expect a number of you are planning on skipping out after the first paragraph because, well, you're not collectors. But you know what. I believe you are. I, in fact, believe *all* **Magic** players are collectors. But that's really more of a topic for the second paragraph.

## C'mon, You Know You Want To

I used a little writing trick there. It's called a tease for those unfamiliar with the term. In writing, you always worry about losing the viewer/reader, so at the most vulnerable point (before the commercial for television, at the end of the page for comics, at the end of the chapter for books) you give a little tease that tempts the viewer/reader to stay through the commercial or to turn the page. Or in my case, to read the next paragraph. A big tease used at the end of an installment, by the way, is called a cliffhanger. But enough of writing tricks, what's this about all **Magic** players being collectors? To understand my theory I have to first explain the two different types of collectors.



**The Completist** – This is the collector that most people think about when they think about “a collector”. The completist sees collecting as a very specific goal. They choose a group of objects and then set out to collect every item in that category. Their collection is incomplete until they have every item. The stereotypical **Magic** collector is one who collects every existing **Magic** card. But, this is actually a small minority. Most **Magic** completists actually collect a smaller group of cards. I'm not just talking about non-premium cards or just English cards. I mean all the black cards or all the elves. Perhaps all the cards illustrated by Rebecca Guay or cards which picture beebles in their artwork.

A completist sees collecting as a fun task. They enjoy the act of seeking out the category and then acquiring the cards. They see collecting as an active hobby. And because they can choose the scope of their category, they have complete control of how easy or hard their collecting will be. I think more **Magic** players fall into this camp than realize it. What they don't realize is that they've just shrunk down their category to a more manageable size.

**The Gatherer** – If the completist is the active collector, the gatherer is the passive collector. Like the completist, the gatherer picks a category for collecting. But unlike the completist, the gatherer does not expect to collect all the items in the category. He or she merely enjoys getting as many as they can. The best example of this would be the “frog lady”. Everyone knows a frog lady. This is a lady who likes frogs. As such, she goes out of her way to find things with frogs on them or built in a frog-shape. (New things by the way, not the same things again and again.) Soon her family and friends learn of her collection and they start joining in on the frog

acquisition. And before she knows it, she has a lot (a lot!) of frog-related items. Now, she'll never own every frog-related item. She knows this. But the collecting joy for her is in the acquisition and not the completion.

This is where I claim most **Magic** collectors lie. They're like the frog lady, except replace the word "frog" with the words "**Magic** cards" and the word "lady" with "guy" (and occasionally "gal"). Your **Magic** collection is much like the frog lady's frogs. If you're still skeptical, let me ask the following question. Have you ever traded a card you had a duplicate of to get a card you didn't own yet? If your answer is yes, I'd say that exhibits the signs of you being a gatherer. If your answer is no, ... liar!

So you see, when I talk about collectability, I feel it's an issue that touches every **Magic** player. And as you will see, it has quite an impact in how we make **Magic**.

## "I Love It When A Collection Comes Together"

When I first thought about writing this column I wanted to find an interesting way to look at the issue. I wanted to find a way to show the collector's needs and how **Magic** is designed to meet them. But having worked at Wizards for eight and half years, I realized I was a little too far removed from my days as a rabid **Magic** collector. One of the hard truths about working in R&D is that you play a lot more of "potential" **Magic** and a lot less of "real" **Magic**. As such, there's less incentive to collect all the cards.

And then it hit me. I'm still a rabid collector. A die-hard completist. Just not of **Magic** cards. What if I shared with all of you my personal collection and use that as a way to show how I feel as someone on the consumer side of the equation? I'm hoping that this will demonstrate how **Magic** takes into account the needs and feelings of the collector.

Most of my life I was a closet completist looking for something to collect. Then along came **Magic**. And it wasn't long until I started collecting one of every card. But then I came to Wizards and as I explained above, my collecting drive began to wane.

That all changed two years ago, when my inner completist found a new item to collect. As I've mentioned numerous times before I'm a big fan of comic books. I have been most of my life. I'm also a fan of action figures. This goes back to my youth. My inner frog lady collected Mego super hero action figures. But action figures are kind of bulky and what fun is a collection if you can't show it off. But two years ago, I stumbled upon DC Pocket Superheroes (created by DC Direct). Inspired by an earlier line of miniature superhero figures (by Mego, no less), the Pocket Heroes was a line of three and a half inch DC superheroes (for those unfamiliar with comics, DC is the company that prints Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, etc.). And not just the popular ones. The line was planning to do many more obscure heroes that I have fond memories of reading in my youth.



The Pocket Heroes led me to discover a Japanese company called Medicom. They produce a series of small figures (about two and a half inches), called Kubricks, representing a wide array of mass media properties from Star Wars to Reservoir Dogs to Planet of the Apes. Medicom started a series of figures based on Marvel superheroes (Marvel for those unfamiliar is the company that prints Spider-man, the X-men, the Hulk, etc.). Once I saw them online, I knew I needed to acquire them.

And then I learned that a company called Art Asylum was starting a series of two inch figures of Marvel Superheroes (and later this year DC as well). Three companies all creating miniature superhero figures. My completist had its category.

## "And What Does This Have To Do With Magic?"

It is very interesting to be the consumer looking in at the company (or in my case, companies) creating the items I collect. I have learned quite a bit about how to serve collectors by seeing what it's like to be the outsider. Below are some of my observations about my miniature hero collection and what it's taught me about how Wizards makes **Magic**.

## Observation #1: What Makes Collecting Fun Is The Challenge (aka The Joy Of Finding A Promotional Japanese Daredevil)

Each of the three companies (DC Direct – makes Pocket Superheroes, Art Asylum – makes Minimates, and Medicom – makes Kubricks) approaches its collectors with a different attitude. DC Direct is very straight-forward. They don't make hard to find variations. (Although they have had a few promotional figures.) They merely print a number of new figures on a regular schedule. Collecting the Pocket Superheroes is pretty easy. Just make sure you buy the figures when they come out.

Art Asylum is a bit more aggressive in making their product harder to collect. Each series of figures has one figure (always a variation on an existing figure) that's harder to get because a smaller number of them are printed. Usually a case of product would only have one of these figures versus the normal three or four copies of the other figures. This technique, known as shortpacking, is very common in the action figure business. In addition, Art Asylum does numerous exclusives that are only sold through a certain store or online business. On top of that, they also do promotional figures that can only be purchased at certain events.

But Art Asylum isn't the hardest of the three. That honor belongs to Medicom. Kubricks, you see, are only sold in Japan. (And if you don't have any connections, like me, then it's quite the challenge.) And, unlike their American counterparts, Medicom sells its figures randomly. That means that when you purchase a box, you don't know which figure is in it. And, there are rare figures that only show up once per case (1 out of 24). And special hard-to-find rares that only show up once per four cases (1 out of 96). In addition, Medicom also does many promotional figures that can also be hard to get. (Especially if you don't live in Japan.) One promotion, for example, was only given to people who advance ordered the Daredevil DVD.



*Kubrick X-men (on top) and my Minimate X-men (on bottom)*

**What I've learned** – As a completist, I want some challenge. It's not fun if it's too easy to get. Aesthetically, I think my Pocket Superheroes are my favorite as they look most like their comic book versions. But it's been the least fun to collect because it's just been too easy. There aren't any variants. There's been very few promotional figures. I just don't get the adrenalin rush that the others give me. And remember, it's my favorite of the three in terms of aesthetics (a quick aside for fellow collectors: I simply display my figures so articulation, Pocket Heroes' biggest weakness, isn't all that important to me).

**How Magic Handles It** – The challenge is an important part of the collecting process. As such, **Magic** has made great effort to create challenges for its collectors. During *Urza's Legacy*, for instance, we introduced premium cards. From Friday Night **Magic** to pre-releases to Player Rewards, Wizards tries to create lots of opportunities for promotional cards. We have taken a number of steps to keep the **Magic** collecting community on its toes. This impacts both the completists and the gatherers. For the completists, it makes the challenge more difficult (and I believe, more fun). For the gatherers, it creates more offbeat items for their collection that they can enjoy showing off ("Check out my frog electric toothbrush.").

## Observation #2: Hard Is Fun; Too Hard is Not (aka Curse You Gold Spiderman!)

Art Asylum does quite a number of exclusive and/or promotional figures. Normally, a limited run is 5000 figures. Collecting one of these figures is challenging but doable. Then last year at San Diego Comic-Con (and Wizard World Chicago), Art Asylum created a special promotional Gold Spider-man. How many were produced? 50. You heard me, 50! In order to get one, you had to go to one of these two conventions (one in San Diego and one in Chicago), show-up each day during a certain scheduled time and get one of 250 free blank figures. One of those figures randomly had a sticker on it that told you that you won the Gold Spider-man. That's all: travel to another city and get a 1 in 250 chance (assuming you were one of the first 250 in line) each day of acquiring the figure. A few of these Gold Spider-men have shown up on E-bay and sold for over \$500 (the last one for over \$800).

I can't tell you how much the Gold Spider-man pisses me off as a collector. I actually contemplated giving up on the Minimates as I knew as a completist I would not be able to complete my collection (I cannot justify spending \$500+ on a little plastic figure with three kids to put through college.) I finally decided that I would just ignore it, but to this day, I feel I cannot claim to have all the Minimates. And that greatly saddens me. (If anyone has a Gold Spider-man, by the way, and is willing to part with it for unique **Magic** paraphernalia, let me know.)

**What I've Learned** – While collecting can be challenging, it has to be fair. A collector with his act together that's paying attention should be able to get their hands on an item (even if only on e-Bay) for a reasonable price. I'm not saying it has to be dirt cheap, but it shouldn't skyrocket to hundreds of dollars overnight.

**How Magic Handles It** – To keep cards from getting too unfair, we actually have limits in place to ensure that all promotional cards exist in a large enough quantity to guarantee that they won't skyrocket overnight. Now be aware that some promotional cards seep out over time meaning that the first few copies might go for crazy prices, but once more cards are released the market will settle down to a fair price.

## Observation #3: Be Careful What You Make Hard To Collect (aka I Can Just Live With Electra In The Red Dress)

All three companies do hard-to-get promotional items and variants. But each handles it differently. DC Direct tends to make its promotional figures ones that are scheduled to come out later that year but sometimes with a different look. (For example, the very first Pocket Heroes promotion was a Golden Age Wonder Woman, that is a Wonder Woman as she looked in the 40's. Later that year, the Silver Age, as she looked in the 60's, was available for sale.) Art Asylum puts variants in each series that are alternate versions of a character in that series. Doctor Doom comes without his mask. Cyclops without his visor. And Electra gets a cool black outfit. In addition, they create unique promotional items, that is figures that are unique and not variants of existing characters. Medicom's hard-to-get figures are almost always unique.

This is an issue that tends to split completists and gatherers. Completists enjoy acquiring all the items, so it doesn't matter nearly as much to them that some individual figure is hard to get. Gatherers, on the other hand, very much care. They tend to collect the pieces that interest them. If their favorite character is very hard-to-get, they get upset. As a completist, I tend to fall into the first camp on my figures. I kind of like when they make unique hard-to-get characters. That said, it would have pissed me off to no end if the Gold Spider-man (which really doesn't mean anything in comic terms – Spider-man to the best of my knowledge has never dressed up in a gold outfit) had been a unique character instead of yet another retread of Spider-man (I'll get to this one in a second.)

**What I've Learned** – There is a thin line between keeping the completists and the gatherers happy. The happy middle ground is variants. Completists enjoy cool variants. Gatherers don't feel a need to have every version of a character thus can simply acquire the more common version.

**How Magic Handles It** – In **Magic**, the equivalent is cards with unique abilities. Completists would probably enjoy tracking down a unique card, but the gatherers would hate it. How do I know this? Because in **Magic's** early history, there were unique promotional cards. Six cards, five cards that came with **Magic** novels (*Arena*, *Sewers of Estark*, *Giant Badger*, *Windseeker Centaur* and *Mana Crypt*) and one that was given out at the 1994 Dragoncon convention (*Nalathni Dragon*). One of them, *Mana Crypt*, was powerful enough for Type I play (back then just **Magic** play). This caused all sorts of ill will. Duelist #3 even included a copy of *Nalathni Dragon* to try and rectify things.



The solution that Wizards came up with, which we continue to this day, is that promotional cards cannot be mechanically unique. They can have alternate art, alternate treatments (such as premium), alternate layouts, but they have to be existing **Magic** cards.

## Observation #4: We Don't Like Having To Buy The Same Thing Twice (aka Can You At Least Spring For a New Paint Job?)

Pocket Heroes shifted from selling two-packs of figures to selling box sets that had five or six figures. (This was done to revamp the line as it wasn't selling as well as DC Direct had hoped – although a quick aside to collectors – please don't give up on the Pocket Heroes. I honestly believe it looks the best of any of the miniature figures and DC seems more willing to make more obscure characters.) When they started making the box sets, they built them around the popular characters. But they'd already done most of the popular characters. How did they handle this?

The key was in the paint job (meaning how the figure is decorated). For those unfamiliar with action figures, there are two key components to making a figure. There is the sculpt. And there is the paint job. Because sculpts are so expensive, usually numerous characters use the same sculpt. The way to make them feel different, is to have different paint jobs. So when DC Direct redid a number of popular characters, they made an effort to do a new paint job on most of the figures. As a completist, I treated these figures as variants rather than just repeats. DC Direct was able to add value for me rather than subtract it. (As an aside, they didn't do significant paint jobs on all the figures – Superman, for example, looked identical.)

**What I've Learned** – There is a very thin line between giving collectors something new and just giving them a repeat. But that line is a very important one. Collectors like variants. They dislike repeats. A little bit of money and effort can have huge dividends.

**How Magic Handles It** – I'm often asked why we don't repeat card illustrations when we repeat cards. Besides creative issues, it is very much about this issue. A repeat with new art is considered by collectors to be a new card. This is something **Magic** did right early so I have no evidence that it would go badly if we had handled it differently. But in my heart, as a collector, I know.

Now there is one exception where we do repeat a card with the same art. And that is the basic set. This is one of the major reasons we use the white border. We want to make sure that the collectors can differentiate between an original card and its repeat.

## Observation #5: Too Many Variations Get Annoying (aka Another Spider-man?)

While DC Direct is repainting identical sculpts, Art Asylum is doing something similar but different. Let me explain. Fives series of Minimates have come out. Including promotional figures, here's all the Spider-men (is that the correct plural?) that exist: Traditional Spider-man, Spider-man in the Black Suit (what would later become Venom), Battle Damaged Spiderman, Ultimate Spider-man (as he appears in the Ultimate Universe), Unmasked Spider-man, Grab-line Spider-man (with his mask pulled up like when he kissed Mary Jane in the movie), Half Spider-man/Half Peter Parker (how Spider-man used to look as Peter Parker when his spider sense went off), Peter Parker, and, of course, Gold Spider-man (arrggh!). In short, a *lot* of Spider-men.



To be fair, Art Asylum is trying to make the line profitable and there is no more popular or well-known Marvel superhero than Spider-man. And, I don't necessarily mind some variants as long as they matter. The Black-Suited Spider-man, for instance, seems cool as its existence is very core to a major part of the Spider-man mythos. But the Half Spider-man/Half Peter Parker? *Lame.*

**What I've Learned** – While some variation is cool. Too much variation of the same item is annoying. Some of it is a necessary evil, but, man, I wish Art Asylum was a smidgeon more creative in their Spider-man proliferation (and I know there's more down the road.)

**How Magic Handles It** – **Magic** has a similar concern. If we keep hitting the same note again and again, we will likewise start to drive collectors away. Luckily, we have a huge edge over all the companies I've talked about today. What drives **Magic** is the game, not the IP (intellectual property). The creative elements are important and add a lot of extra value onto **Magic**, but because it is not the focus of what makes people play, we have a lot more freedom to constantly change things up. This year metal world. Next year... well, if you've seen [the Magic Arcana that announced the Kamigawa block](#), you'll know - definitely not-metal world.

With this freedom, we have a lot easier time shaking things up. And as the guy now in charge of the Creative Team let me promise you that there are many cool things coming your way. (And for those cynics out there, please wait to see what we've actually done before you condemn it. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised.)

## Observation #6: We Like To Know What We Have To Collect (aka Medicom, Stop Hiding The Rare Figure)

Little details are often overlooked, but can matter a great deal. Take, for instance, the back of the box. All three companies use the back of the box to show you what figures are in that series. Art Asylum even shows you what the variant hard-to-get figure is. But Medicom falls down in this area. Oh, they show you the regular figures in that series. They even show you the super-hard-to-find figure. But for some reason, they don't bother telling you what the rare figure is. In fact, if you weren't aware that the rare figure existed, the package would never clue you in. The reason I point out this little detail is that completists, by definition, need to know what all the items in the category are.

**What I've Learned** – If you want to cater to collectors, you need to make it easy for them to know what exists. Ironically, when **Magic** first began, it was Wizards' policy to never give out card lists. I'm not talking about spoilers that list all the card text. I mean card lists that merely list the name and rarity. The thought was that such a list would destroy the exploration of the game. Now this was before the Internet was widespread, so it's not quite as crazy as it seems. (Although, don't mistake me, it was rather crazy.) This is another area where a lot has changed.

**How Magic Handles It** – For starters, **Magic** now has complete spoilers. Heck, when we mention a card (like, say, [Look At Me, I'm the DCI](#)) in an article there's a link to the card image. But we've even gone a bit farther. Starting with *Exodus*, we began labeling the rarity on the card as well as listing card numbers. (And expansion symbols go all the way back to *Arabian Nights*.) This way, collectors knew exactly what they had and could piece together what they needed.

## Observation #7: We Want To Know Our Stuff Has Value (aka Is Superman Ever Going To Be Worth Anything?)

I saved this for last because it's a touchy one. Earlier I talked about how I got peeved when a company repeated a figure. Let me talk about the larger concern when this happens. It's not just about wasting money, but rather wanting to know that my collection has value. One of the fun parts about collecting is that you acquire stuff that grows more rare over time. When a company keeps printing the same figure (with the same paint job), that figure loses much of its specialness.

As an example, let's look at Superman in the Pocket Heroes line. There have been three Supermen printed to date. A promotion version that was given away at key conventions. A

normal Superman that was packaged with Clark Kent (how is that possible?) and a Superman that came in the Justice League box set. All three are, to the best of my ability, identical. (Assuming you take them out of the package as I do.) This makes my Superman figures less valuable to me. And I don't have any confidence that the problem is going to correct itself anytime soon. (A Superman box set comes out in December and I'm expecting yet another duplicate Superman.)

**What I've Learned** – Collectors take pride in their collection growing over time. Each time a company repeats something, that value lessens.

**How Magic Handles It** – For starters, this is another reason why the white border exists for the basic set. We want to be able to repeat cards without taking away the value from the original cards. In addition, this is why we have [the Reserved List](#). Wizards wanted to stress to the public that there are a healthy amount of valuable cards that we will never reprint.



Every time I talk about the Reserve List, I get a flurry of letters begging me to scrap it and start reprinting some of the early powerful cards. Some of these letters are from players who even own these cards that claim they are willing to take the financial hit for “the good of the game” to allow newer players access to those older cards. What you don't know is that I always get an equal number of letters from the opposite side thanking me for Wizards' dedication to preserving the Reserve List.

This is a no-win situation as two different groups want opposite things. Wizards had to make a choice of where to come down on the issue. In the end, we picked a compromise, promising something to each group. For the gatherers, we promised to restrict promotional cards to cards that are not mechanically unique. No more **Mana Crypt**. For the completists, we made the Reserved List to promise to keep the value of their collection they worked so hard to collect. No more **Ancestral Recall**.

On one end, we restrict how far we can go to make the hard-core collectors happy. On the other end, we restrict how far we can go to make them upset. As I often point out in my column, making **Magic** is often a question of balancing between two opposing forces. This is yet another example of trying to strike such a balance.

## Passing Go

As you can see, the collecting aspect of **Magic** is a complicated one. It has to be challenging but not *too* challenging. It has to have novelty but not too much novelty. It has to look toward the future but also towards the past. I think we've been doing a good job. But as always here's the part where I ask your two cents. How do all of you feel **Magic** is doing as a collectable? If you have an opinion, please let me know ([makingmagic@wizards.com](mailto:makingmagic@wizards.com)).

In addition, this column was a little different than normal. I got a little more personal than I usually do. Did you like it? Did you enjoy me talking about something non-**Magic** to make a point about **Magic**? Or did I stray too far? My column is an evolving entity. Your input will shape its future.

That's all I got for today. Join me next week when we starting dipping our toe into the dawn after the fourth one.

Until then, may you find a cool frog.

Mark Rosewater

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Mark may be reached at [makingmagic@wizards.com](mailto:makingmagic@wizards.com).

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