

An M:TGer at Gen Con

Mark Rosewater

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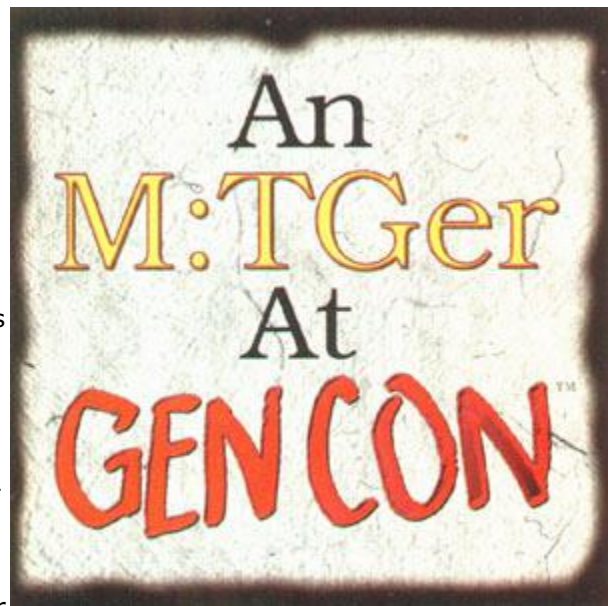
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I was quite young the first time I heard the GenCon legend. Gamers of all types would flock to this mythical gathering each August in a far off land called Milwaukee. Once there, they would huddle en masse, sharing stories, games, and the occasional meal or two. And for four days, the world would cease to exist.

Now, I'm what's considered a **Magic**[™] "old timer." When I started over a year ago, there was no [Circle of Protection: Black](#), Moxes were just another rare artifact, and everyone traded Alpha cards freely (they hadn't even become "Alpha" yet). About the same time I was being introduced to this new "trading card game," **Magic** was making its first big explosion at GenCon '93.

I remembered hearing stories about **Magic**'s success from the convention and I could only wonder what would happen after a year's gestation. Three revisions and four expansions later, **Magic** had gone from just another new game to an international phenomenon. Add to the excitement the premiere of a new **Deckmaster**[™] game, the first **Magic** World Championship, and the promise by a Wizards of the Coast employee of "the biggest **Magic** circus I'd ever seen," and I knew that nothing was going to keep me away.

So come late August, I caught a plane to Milwaukee. Finally, I was going to be one of the countless many to make the trek. This was the year that the legend was to become reality.

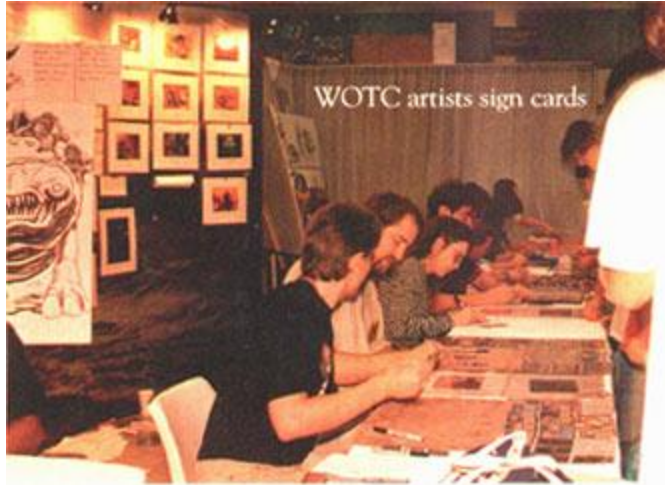


We're off to see the Wizard

With my overloaded backpack, I made my way to the Mecca Convention Center early Thursday morning. The doors to the exhibition hall had yet to open, so I waited in the lobby. I started talking to the person next to me, a man from Indiana, and in a matter of minutes we were sitting on the ground playing **Magic**. This was my earliest sign that **Magic** was going to have a presence at the convention.

As opening time got closer, hundreds of gamers crowded the door. Rumors flew that Wizards of the Coast was selling *Jyhad*[™] starters and boosters, and packages of *Legends*[™] and *The Dark*[™], at retail prices. And the rumors were that the rumors were true. This was mid-August, when *The*

Darkand Legends were no longer easily accessible (especially at retail price) and *Jyhad* had just come out.



The floodgates finally released, and the crowd had its walking race (you can't run in the convention center) to the Wizards of the Coast booth. For those unfamiliar with what employees call the "mana temple," it is a rather tall, five-sided structure made out of black marble (well, simulated black marble) and graced by beautiful representations of the five mana symbols. Monitors displaying art from *Jyhad* rested in two of the temple's columns.

I had quite a bit of time to admire the mana temple as I was in "the line." To truly appreciate "the line," you should know that the exhibition hall is longer than your average football field. Quite a bit longer in fact. But somehow, it wasn't quite long enough for "the line." This is not to say we didn't enjoy ourselves while we waited. We talked about **Magic**, we chatted with several Wizards employees, including the president of the company, Peter Adkison, and we got more freebies than you can shake a stick at (at last count, I had two posters, several pens, a new catalog, and a refrigerator magnet). We even had a close encounter with a Serra Angel.

Let me explain that last part: for fun, a number of WotC employees dressed up as characters from the cards. Besides the Serra, we had visits throughout the weekend from a [Bird Maiden](#), Tim (a [Prodigal Sorcerer](#) who carried a stick to "poke" you with), Tashiar (the bird-headed tiger "guy" from "[Natural Selection](#)"), a [Hurloon Minotaur](#), a [Scryb Sprite](#), the wizard from "[Counterspell](#)", the doll from [Black Vise](#), and a [Vesuvan Doppelganger](#). (Actually, there were three Doppelgangers: two non-WotC congoers, sisters Kristin Looney and Ruth Levenstein, wandered through the convention hall in matching costumes.)

Once I bought my allotted packs (everything was rationed to ensure that everyone in "the line" got some), I checked out the booth. Next to the crazed "card sale" section was a much more subdued area where **Magic**-related items like t-shirts, books, and calendars were sold. Next to that was the "play us for ante" section, where WotC employees would play anyone who wanted in an ante game of **Magic**. (If you're ever at a convention, I'd try it; the Wizard's employees seemed to "lose" quite often.)

At the demo section of the booth, I played *RoboRally*TM, a new Richard Garfield board game which is due out in mid-November. Not only did I have a great time, but I earned a much greater respect for the ability to tell right from left. In the roleplaying area (yes, Wizards of the Coast actually makes other games), all of WotC's roleplaying merchandise was on display.

After turning the corner, I found the area designated as the "trading post." Although some trading occurred here, the area was quickly redesignated the "*Jyhad* demo area" where Jeff (a very dedicated WotC employee) tried to set the world record for continuous *Jyhad* teaching. Finally, we came upon the corner occupied by MicroProse, a software company which had recently announced plans to put out the official computerized version of **Magic**. They had a screen to show off their graphics (very

attractive, with art taken from the actual cards), and a programmer who answered questions like "how in the world are you ever going to program the computer to play a game like **Magic**?"

As if the one booth wasn't enough, just a few feet away was the artists' section, where a host of **Deckmaster** artists tirelessly signed cards. Many of the artists had prints of their work for sale. If you think the art looks good in **Magic**, you should see some of it at actual size! I had a great time chatting with the artists and got to ask all of my burning art questions, like is that [Merfolk of the Pearl Trident](#) supposed to look like Harvey Keitel? I even got to meet the model for [Rubinia Soulsinger](#), a WotC employee, by the way, who happens to have red hair, not brown. Before I left, I also got to watch part of the Artists' Jam. The Jam was a chance for all of the artists to work together on three different murals which were later auctioned off for charity. (My favorite piece had all our favorite heavy-hitting creatures dueling it out in a coliseum with the small creatures cheering them on.)



The completed ComicCon artist jam piece

You mean there's more?

Having explored every nook and cranny of WotC's booth, I decided it was time to check out the several hundred other booths at GenCon. This task took the better part of the next few days as I slowly absorbed all the convention had to offer. What TSR had started 26 years ago as the premiere roleplaying convention had metamorphosed over the years into something much bigger. This is not to say that roleplaying has diminished (far from it in fact), but GenCon has grown in scope to become many conventions rolled into one.

For roleplayers, there were representatives from every major (and minor) company with a campaign to peddle. From fantasy (TSR's giant castle), to cyberpunk (FASA's futuristic city and skyline), to gothic horror (White Wolf's graveyard), all the big names in roleplaying came to the convention in style, and the four days were filled with hundreds of roleplaying tournaments, exhibition games, and contests.

For science fiction buffs, there were seminars with famous writers, workshops for aspiring famous writers, a sci-fi art show, screenings of films, a museum of sci-fi movie props, and lots and lots of Star Trek. Trekkies could meet Majel Barrett and John de Lancie (Lwaxana Troi and Q, respectively), and could try out the captain's seat, pick up Star Trek paraphernalia, and even get arrested by Klingons. The latter, for charity, allowed you to pay to have anyone arrested and put into a Klingon brig. I believe they made some people -- including Richard Garfield -- sing show tunes to get out.

For comics fans, there were writers and artists from all the major companies (DC, Marvel, Image, Dark Horse, etc.) holding signings and giving talks. An entire section of the exhibition hall was devoted to nothing but comics retailers, allowing collectors to find that one back issue that had always eluded them.

And the list goes on. Strategists had a war room. Miniaturists had contests and exhibitions. Computer gamers had a virtual reality playroom all their own.

GenCon also saw the formation of a new subset of con-goer: the trading-card gamer, or "tracard" as I heard several call themselves. The sheer number of fans in this new gaming genre did not go unnoticed by the convention, as many exhibitors scrambled to capture a piece of the exploding market. Announcements of new trading card games came from what seemed to be every other booth. Not being one to miss out on anything new, I tracked down as many of those games as I could to give them a try. (Most of these games weren't for sale yet, so I mostly played with company demos).

I kicked butt with the Enterprise (*Star Trek*), got attacked with a giant space eel (*Galactic Empires*), grew forty feet due to radiation (*SuperDeck!*), controlled the world with gnomes (*Illuminati: New World Order*), used a car as a throwing weapon (*Jyhad*), manipulated tourists (*On The Edge*), led an army of skeletons (*Spellfire*), ran a city (*SimCity*), fought a dogfight in space (*Star of the Guardians*), and all in all had a heck of a good time! I saw the future in games, and it's going to be shuffled.

The Games people play (and the hours they play them)

The trading card game experience couldn't be held within the confines of the exhibition hall, and it exploded throughout the convention center (and even beyond). As I rode up the escalator to the second-floor gaming area, I began to understand an aside I had heard earlier in the day. While buying some lunch, the man next to me had made a reference to the "**Magic** termites." And it was true: **Magic** players had staked out every horizontal surface on the second floor of the convention center. No matter where you turned, players were busy dueling or holding impromptu trading sessions.

Amazed by the sheer number of **Magic** players, I found myself walking around the gaming area to soak it all in. At table after table (and floorspace after floorspace), people from all over the world were congregating with strangers to enjoy the one thing they had in common: **Magic**.

For some, this meant dueling, just pitting the decks against the unknown and taking on planeswalkers from far off realms. As I watched two men from literally opposite ends of the globe happily dueling

away, I realized that this was the ultimate realization of Richard Garfield's vision: two strange mages coming together to test one another through magical combat.



For others, this horde of **Magic** fans offered the ultimate opportunity for trade. The second floor had turned into the largest bartering marketplace most **Magic** players had ever seen. No limits were set as even the most obscure spells were available to those willing to bargain. Not wanting to miss out myself, I dived right in. Seeing two people exchanging cards in the corner, I walked over and introduced myself. Our little threesome quickly ballooned and before I knew it, the quiet corner had become home to over fifteen traders.

Trading led to talking and my companions soon acquired names. What had started as the search for a [Diamond Valley](#) ended in making friends that I saw throughout the convention, and not only in **Magic** settings. I later ran into one trading partner in a nearby hotel, and we ended up having dinner together. I also had the chance to see lots of old friends from previous conventions and got to meet several people face to face that up until then had only been voices on the Internet. More and more, I realized that **Magic** isn't merely a game, but a community as well.

Once my deck was assembled, I was ready to test it under combat conditions. Since many of the **Magic** players were planning on entering the World Championship, it wasn't hard to find appropriate competition. I played duel after duel until the convention hall closed and we were forced to the hotel next door to continue. I knew **Magic** had completely warped my brain when I saw the sun coming up: the first thought that crossed my mind was, "Oh good, that means the convention hall should open soon.

Another thing that struck me as I played my **Magic**-a-thon was how different all the players were. With representatives from every demographic group (not an easy task in the game world), **Magic** players were a curious lot. To some, it was a fun diversion. To others, it was a religion that they lived and breathed. Some played to win, and [Black Lotus](#) antes were not an unfamiliar sight. Others, though, played simply for the fun of playing. A few didn't even play, preferring to talk about it instead.

Although **Magic** had a giant presence, you could also see many other games being played throughout the gaming area. Thanks to *GAMES* magazine, there was a library that lent out just about any game you could imagine for two dollars. More than a few gamers were stopped in their tracks by the sight of an old favorite they hadn't played in years.

Also making a presence, outshone only by **Magic** itself, was *Jyhad*. The second game in the **Deckmaster** series, *Jyhad* had been introduced at GenCon and seemed to be a hit from the start. Its transformation at the convention was fun to watch. On Thursday, people at different tables looked at their newly acquired cards while someone in the group read the instructions. On Friday, people were playing in small groups, cautiously rereading every card before playing it. On Saturday, the ranks of the *Jyhad* people swelled as friends were pulled into the web. And on Sunday, large groups were in full gear everywhere.

The general consensus seemed to be that *Jyhad*, while related to **Magic**, was clearly its own game. The mood, tone, and art were all darker, the game balance leaned more toward multi-player, and the rules were a bit more complex. While not to everyone's liking, *Jyhad* drew quite a few firmly into its grasp and seemed to quickly find a niche all its own. As one *Jyhad* gamer put it, "*Jyhad* is **Magic** with a bad attitude."

The play's the thing (although winning would be nice)

Time rushed by at the speed it always does when you're having a good time, and the World Championship was upon us in the blink of an eye. After waiting in a lengthy ticket line (which was actually small potatoes compared to "the line"), I managed to nab one of the 512 slots available. The tournament was the biggest the Duelists' Convocation had ever held, and the early rounds were split up into eight qualifying heats of 64 players each and spread over two days. The eight winners from each heat would all meet up on Sunday for the finals.

My heat took place somewhere in the bowels of "the arena," the huge section where all the roleplaying tournaments were held. The matches (two out of three duels) were each picked randomly with only the winners advancing. Everyone was a bit nervous as they prepared for the first set of matches. Talking to many of my fellow competitors, I realized what variety the contest had attracted. Some of the players were tournament veterans that unconsciously mouthed the rules as they were read. Other players were fans of the game that felt it was time to test their mettle against so-called "tournament decks." A few poor souls were beginners that had no idea what they had stumbled into. But regardless of why we were there, we were united by our participation in what we all felt was the top of **Magic's** roller coaster freshman year.

I'd like to say I advanced to the finals without any close calls. Heck, I'd like to say I advanced to the finals. But every deck has its counter, and I met mine in round two. Still, like many others, I didn't leave after losing and stuck around to watch the conclusion of our heat. It's interesting to note that even in a tournament as large as this, no one took any duel for granted. Competition was fierce from the start, and as I later learned, even the champion himself admitted to almost losing his very first match.

The finals started at 8:00 am Sunday and continued through the day. The last match ended up starting at 3:00 pm. Living up to its billing as the World Championship, the semi-finals came down to two players from France, one from Belgium, and one from the U.S. The finalists were Bertrand Lestreé (France), who beat Cyrille DeFoucand (France), 2-1, and Zak Dolan (U.S.), who beat Dominic Symens (Belgium), 2-0.

The World Championship was a tension-filled, three-game match, crowded with spectators. The first game went the quickest. Zak started strong after he won the die roll and played an [Ivory Tower](#) on his first turn. Bertrand, though, quickly dominated the game with two [Chain Lightnings](#) in his first two turns. Zak tried slowing Bertrand down with a [Kismet](#), but there was no stopping him as he managed to bring both a Whirling Dervish and [Mishra's Factory](#) into play. The Dervish just kept attacking and growing, until finally Zak wasted it with a [Swords to Plowshares](#). Bertrand's reply was just a third [Chain Lightning](#), bringing Zak down to 10 life points. Zak then made his biggest mistake of the tournament when he wasted his [Mana Drain](#) as Bertrand summoned a [Kird Ape](#). No one winced more than Zak when Bertrand revealed two of his cards seconds later: a [Channel](#) and a [Fireball](#). We all knew the game was over when Bertrand smiled and said, "How much life do you have left?" The match stood at 1-0.

Zak fiddled with his sideboard to get a [Circle of Protection: Red](#), [Power Sink](#), and [Reverse Damage](#), and then the second game began. Zak's first turn luck held as he played both a [Library of Alexandria](#) and a [Mox Emerald](#). Both players just played land for the next few turns with the only excitement being Bertrand's [Demonic Tutoring](#) for a [Black Lotus](#). He immediately used the Lotus to cast a [Mind Twist](#) of two on Zak. Finally, some action got going as Bertrand summoned a [Kird Ape](#) which Zak proceeded to take control of on his next turn. Not willing to take any abuse from his own Ape, Bertrand wasted it with a [Lightning Bolt](#). Bertrand then rebuilt his attack forces with [Argothian Pixies](#) and a [Mishra's Factory](#). Zak tried summoning some defense (in the form of a [Serra Angel](#)), but Bertrand [Psionic Blasted](#) it before the card even hit the table. While the Pixies and Factory did their damage, Zak regrouped his efforts and began emptying his hand (casting [Time Elemental](#), [Time Walk](#), [Howling Mine](#), [Meekstone](#), and an [Icy Manipulator](#) all in two turns). The momentum started leaning in Zak's direction as he [Swords to Plowshare](#)d the Pixies, [Strip Mined](#) the Factory, and continually denied Bertrand the extra card by tapping the [Howling Mine](#) at the end of his turn. Zak then tried once again to summon a [Serra Angel](#), and history repeated itself as Bertrand countered with a [Psionic Blast](#).





This time, though, Zak had a [Power Sink](#) up his sleeve and the Serra survived. Zak quickly mopped up the game with a [Vesuvan Doppelganger](#) to clone the Serra and a [Recall](#) to bring back the [Time Walk](#). Before Bertrand even got another turn, the Serra Armada delivered a swift twenty points of damage. The match now stood at 1-1.

There was a break before the final game, and some of the spectators seemed as nervous as the players. No one dared move as everyone wanted to keep their spot to watch the last game. Zak and Bertrand meanwhile consulted their sideboards. Zak ended up taking a [Disenchant](#) and a [Karma](#), while Bertrand just took a [Serendib Efreet](#) before the last game got underway. The tone was set rather quickly when Zak's first turn good fortune upped itself a notch and delivered both the [Ivory Tower](#) and [Library of Alexandria](#). Bertrand was understandably more than a little shaken. The next few turns consisted mostly of Zak collecting cards and life and Bertrand cursing while he played nothing but lands. Finally, Bertrand got a break, and within two turns he summoned both a [Whirling Dervish](#) and a [Kird Ape](#). Zak tried to put out an [Old Man of the Sea](#), but Bertrand was ready to greet him with [Lightning Bolt](#) in hand. Zak did little his next few turns other than playing a [Karma](#), and Bertrand launched his attack. The Dervish managed to get up to 4/4 before Zak pulled out a [Wrath of God](#) to send it and the Ape to the Graveyard. Slowly dying from the [Karma](#) (with two [Bayous](#) in play), Bertrand tried to take back the offensive with some [Argothian Pixies](#) and a [Chain Lightning](#). Zak decided not to let him, though, countering with a [Mana Drain](#) and a [Power Sink](#) respectively. Zak then [Regrowthed](#) the [Power Sink](#) and cast [Stasis](#). Realizing that he had no available mana for the foreseeable future (thanks to the [Power Sink/Stasis](#) combination) and down to 10 life, Bertrand accepted his fate and officially conceded the match to make Zak the World Champion.

All four semi-finalists were given prizes, including shirts and multiple boosters from every **Magic** expansion. Zak also received a rather large trophy and got the honor of being the first **Magic** World Champion. (Sort of makes answering the question "So, are you any good?" a little more fun.)

Later, Zak laughed as he expressed his worry that no one would play him anymore. I predicted that his win would produce the "gunslinger effect," and that the competition would be coming out of the woodwork for the chance to best the world champ. Zak admitted that it was still hard to believe he had won. "I'm champion of the world. That takes a little time to kick in."

All tapped out

Just as we were enjoying our post-tournament buzz, the loudspeakers sounded and told us that the convention hall was closing. Had it been four days already? It's so hard to keep track when one forgets to sleep.

On my way out, I walked through the gaming area, now vacant and disturbingly quiet. I stopped at the table where I (and a sizable crowd) had watched an "ante to the death" duel, where the winner got the loser's graveyard (no graveyard affecting cards allowed). I turned to see the corner where I had traded for over an hour with a man that spoke no English. And then as I moved down the hall, I passed the snack bar where I had seen a woman barter for lunch with a [Mirror Universe](#). Before I left the convention center, I took one last peek at the exhibition hall. Once filled to capacity with a swarm of gamers, it was now an empty shell of half dismantled booths. My eyes flitted from stand to stand as I relived my pilgrimage through the hall: I had explored new games, rediscovered old ones, and had the simple thrill of "having been here." And in the distance, I saw the "mana temple" coming down. (Funny how black marble can roll up.)

I finally made my way to the exit, but I paused at the door. So much had happened in so little time: crashing the WotC/White Wolf party, talking with Richard Garfield, playing *Jyhad* until 4 am in someone's hotel room. These memories are the best souvenir. (Well, that and the twenty-seven new cards I'd acquired.) With a final sigh, I walked out of the hall onto the sidewalk and GenCon '94 came to an end.