

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



Playtesting the Very First Cards

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Latest Developments
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Next week begins the official previews for *Dissension*, the latest and greatest **Magic: The Gathering** set. In my article that week—and for the next several weeks, I'm sure—I'll be talking about that set's cards and the development (and occasionally design) decisions that went into their creation.

But before heading off on that final leg of our *Ravnica* journey, I thought it would be a good idea to take a detour far, far back into **Magic's** past and talk with someone that was doing a job similar to my own over a dozen years ago.



Back in the early 1990's, before **Magic** cards were ever found in booster packs, Charlie Catino was one of the myriad playtesters from the University of Pennsylvania that Richard Garfield tagged to help get the Alpha card set (and game rules) ready for public consumption. In the years since, Charlie parlayed his association with **Magic** into a job as a full-time playtester here at Wizards, then matured into a proper designer and developer. From there he went to work on other Wizards TCGs like *Netrunner* and *Vampire*, did a stint as the head of Organized Play, and then later returned to R&D. He is currently the R&D Director of Japanese TCGs, and spends most of his time managing various **Duel Masters** teams and projects, although he still dabbles in **Magic** time and again, and was doing development as recently as the *Mirrodin* block.

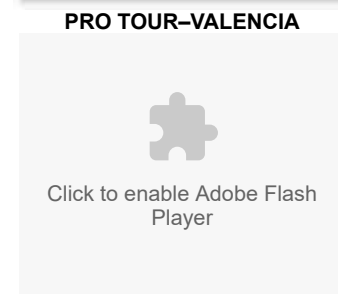
I sat down with Charlie and asked him about the ins and out of testing that historic first few hundred cards...

"I was just a playtester," he warned me. "I wasn't involved in many decisions; I just played the cards and reported my findings." Actually, that's not so different from how I and other neophytes around R&D begin our training as developers nowadays: play a lot, talk about what's happening, and let the more experienced people fix the problems.

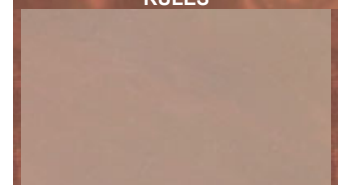
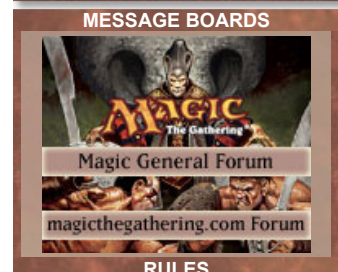
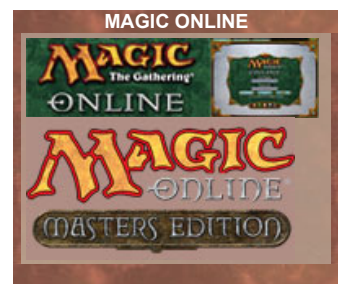
"Richard just wanted us to show him what could be done with **Magic**," he continued, "but the cardpool was very limited." Testing then, it turns out, was not at all like the constructed testing we do now, where we assume competitive players will obtain the maximum allowable copies of any given card. No, instead Charlie and the gang were playing something akin to an unrefined sealed deck league, with small numbers of cards available. "We basically printed about 20 common sheets [a sheet is approximately one of each card], seven uncommon sheets, and two rare sheets and divided them up among our group evenly. So even if you count the cards the guys had that were testing before us, there were only about five **Black Lotus**es available total."

And if you wanted access to any of those cards, you had to go out of your way to trade for them. "One of the main decks I made at the beginning was black-white with **Pestilence** and protection from black creatures. From there I wanted to try something that used a lot of black mana for big **Pestilences** and **Drain Lifes**, so I tried getting a lot of **Dark Rituals**. Rituals #2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 weren't hard to get, but then people started getting nervous—"Charlie is trying to get all the **Dark Rituals**! Don't trade them!"—so numbers 9, 10, 11, and 12 were a lot harder to acquire. And I couldn't get any more after that."

What Richard was looking for was an understanding of how enjoyable the game would be to play—the social experience was as important as the deckbuilding and the playing. "He didn't think people would spend hundreds of dollars on **Magic**," explained Charlie, "but if they did spend more, hey, that's great—we'll fix whatever's



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broken.”

That comment led me to ask Charlie if they realized the “power” cards of the set were so far above the average card from their play experience. “We caught the power cards in time to give plenty of feedback to Richard,” he said, specifically calling out the Moxes, **Time Walk** and **Ancestral Recall**. “Again, no one could make a deck with all Moxes—or even all dual lands—because there just weren’t that many of them. So we never ran into really degenerate situations.”

Was Charlie in a position to suggest costs or abilities for cards? “No, the first playtest group [Skaff Elias, Jim Lin, Chris Page, and Dave Pettey] did most of that—the costs were settled on. Richard was a great designer, sure, but he was also a great developer. He just wanted to make sure there were plenty of combos, and that we could understand the rules interactions. There weren’t rulings for a lot of the stuff that could happen.

“I remember when [fellow playtester] Barry [Reich] played **Unsummon** on one of his creatures that was about to die, and we said, ‘You can’t do that! Richard didn’t want it to work that way.’ So Barry explained what he did to Richard and why he thought it was cool and that it should work that way, and Richard said sure. So there was a little bit of ‘system development’ going on.

“We played for ante a lot; my favorite deck for that was a bunch of common weenies like **Merfolk of the Pearl Trident** and **Scryb Sprites**, some **Counterspells**, and a couple Ancestrals. If you beat me all you’d win was usually some little 1/1. Bill [Rose] and I and the rest of the guys in Philly didn’t really like ante, so we stopped playing that way, and didn’t really ever try stuff like **Demonic Attorney** and **Contract from Below**.” Too bad they couldn’t convince Richard to abandon that portion of the game—I still remember getting **Demonic Attorney** as one of the rares in the first starter

deck I ever opened!

I asked Charlie if there were any cards he remembered being changed as a result of their testing. **Library of Leng** leapt to mind. “It originally let you set aside ten cards from your collection in a pile and draw from them. So one of the testers had a deck that used a bunch of **Time Walks** and counters and **Swords to Plowshares** to control the game, then would play the Library and go get a bunch of **Serra Angels** and **Mahamoti Djinn**s to win the game with.”

One card that didn’t change, though, was **Chaos Orb**, “even though we all hated it,” laughed Charlie. “And the players in the real world pretty much hated that thing too.”

Eventually the playtesters discovered the art of “proxying” their own fake cards, and the decks quickly became mathematical exercises. What wins faster, all **Black Lotus**s and **Channels** and **Fireballs**, or **Time Walks** and **Ancestral Recalls**? “Richard was aware all this stuff could be done ahead of time, but again, he figured if people were spending enough to be able to do that stuff, that was a good problem to have.”

When **Magic** was released, some of the playtesters moved with Richard to Washington, but Charlie, Bill Rose, and others stayed at Penn. There they began putting together the set that would later become **Mirage** on their own time. As the game grew, more positions in the company opened and Charlie was recommended by his old pals in 1994. As part of his job interview process, Charlie was told to play in a **Magic** tournament in Philadelphia using a deck he designed to maximize the effect of **Balance**, a card most players hadn’t quite figured out yet. Charlie was skeptical of the idea, saying, “I’d been playing **Magic** longer than all these people, and I didn’t think it would be fair to go in and crush them. But they wanted me to do it.” His first round opponent was just the kind of guy Charlie didn’t want to sit across from—a newcomer with a 97-card deck containing everything but the kitchen sink. “Game one went like this—I **Strip Mine** his first land and he never plays anything else. Game two, I **Strip Mine** his first *two* lands and he never plays anything else. Turns out he had only twelve lands in 97 cards.”

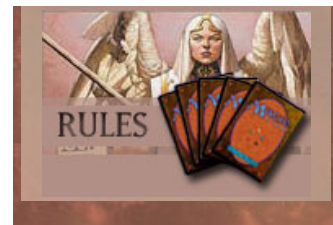
Charlie would go on to finish second in the event, losing in the finals to **Red Elemental Blasts**, **Serendib Efreet**s, and a bit of bad luck. But his performance impressed the folks “back at the office,” who gave him the job, making that the first and last **Magic** event he ever participated in.

Charlie was a great addition to Wizards R&D—the first set he worked on may have been **Homelands**, but the first development team he lead was the well-received **Alliances**. “I’d like to think I came a long way since my first week of playtesting with Richard when I told him that Circles of Protection were ‘broken.’”

Charlie may have been off the mark there, but he’s done a lot of great things for **Magic** and other games since, and enjoys a perspective on the TCG category that few others in the world can lay claim to.

Fun Fact: Charlie’s name may seem familiar to those of you that have scanned **Magic** credits in the past—but not *too* familiar. Starting with the inadvertent typo of “Cateeno” in the game’s first rulebooks, Charlie’s name has been intentionally misspelled in every product he’s work on since as a kind of running gag. Other spellings of Catino include “Cantripino,” “Cantini,” “Cantina,” and “Catman.”

Last Week's Poll:





What is your favorite Orzhov card?

Ghost Council of Orzhova	2314	20.1%
Debtors' Knell	1335	11.6%
Crime/Punishment	1249	10.8%
Angel of Despair	1184	10.3%
Pillory of the Sleepless	934	8.1%
Teysa, Orzhov Scion	682	5.9%
Blind Hunter	518	4.5%
Godless Shrine	417	3.6%
Souls of the Faultless	406	3.5%
Mourning Thrull	321	2.8%
Shadow Lance	316	2.7%
Castigate	259	2.2%
Orzhov Guildmage	220	1.9%
Shrieking Grottesque	191	1.7%
Agent of Masks	187	1.6%
Orzhov Pontiff	156	1.4%
Cry of Contrition	140	1.2%
Seize the Soul	125	1.1%
Belfry Spirit	87	0.8%
Culling Sun	76	0.7%
Orzhova, the Church of Deals	75	0.7%
Graven Dominator	72	0.6%
Conjurer's Ban	62	0.5%
Orzhov Euthanist	43	0.4%
Benediction of Moons	33	0.3%
Moratorium Stone	32	0.3%
Orzhov Basilica	27	0.2%
Revenant Patriarch	19	0.2%
Orzhov Signet	17	0.1%
Ostiary Thrull	11	0.1%
Absolver Thrull	9	0.1%

Exhumer Thrull	7	0.1%
Total	11524	100.0%

I left **Mortify** off the list on purpose... that would have been too easy a choice.

This Week's Poll:

Which *Dissension* guild are you most looking forward to?

Azorius (WU)
 Rakdos (BR)
 Simic (GU)

*Aaron Forsythe was a professional **Magic** player and Internet columnist prior to leaving Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to join Wizards of the Coast. His first duty here was Content Manager of this very website, a job that required him to do actual work as opposed to playing games all the time. So when a position opened in R&D, he jumped at the chance. He is now director of **Magic** R&D, and still plays **Magic** in his free time when he's not busy playing **Magic**.*



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