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How I Got Here, Part 1

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 Latest Developments
 Friday, March 9, 2007



It has been an amazing week for me since I posted my last article on this site - I was appointed the new Director of **Magic** R&D. I suddenly find myself tasked with trying to fill the unfillable shoes of Randy Buehler, who has moved away from **Magic** to become the Vice President of Digital Games. And yes, that means I am now Mark Rosewater's boss. Crazy.

It has been a quick trip up for me; I wasn't even the Head Developer for the entire cycle of development for the forthcoming *Lorwyn* set - a set I led the design of two jobs ago as an Advanced Designer!

I thought I'd take the next week or so to look back at my own life through the lens of **Magic**: The Gathering just to illustrate how one actually gets to become the Director of **Magic** R&D.

Even as a young child, games were presented to me as something to be passionate about. My father would spend nearly every Sunday night until the wee hours of the morning playing a dice baseball game with his older brother, five or six games a night, marking down each play on a score sheet from which statistics were later entered into stacks of notebooks. Over the span of nearly two decades, the two of them managed to play out an entire 154-game season with a sixteen-team league, complete with injuries, trades, an All-Star Game, and a World Series, wherein the All-Time All-Star Pittsburgh Pirates defeated the All-Time All-Star New York Yankees for the crown. Even before I was old enough to read, I can remember peeking over the table at their mess of charts, dice, and coffee cups, asking if I could roll for a batter or two. The previous night's games were often the topic of Monday morning's breakfast conversation, and over the years the names of the players - Smoky Joe Wood, Three-Finger Brown, Stuffey McInnis, Pie Traynor - became etched in my brain and fueled my own love for baseball and its lore. But what stuck with me the most was how this game offered the two of them such an escape; they had created their own world and ventured into it weekly, and each spent time between sessions poring over previous results and statistics looking for edges, looking for stories, finding enjoyment from more than the mere playing of the game.



My brother Neil, a year and a half my younger, and I played lots of games as kids, the majority of which were board games ranging from (This Game is) Bonkers to Dark Tower and later Axis & Allies and its Gamemaster brethren. We also made up our share of games, the bulk of which involved action figures, lots of dice, and lots of floor space. But our lives were changed one evening when one of my father's graduate students, assigned as our babysitter for the night, showed up at our house with a boxed set of Basic Dungeons & Dragons.

We didn't end up playing D&D that night, but the babysitter left us the game, and we were enthralled. We didn't understand all - or much - of it very well. For example, we thought that if you fell through a trapdoor and took damage, you probably wouldn't die because you gained a "level" by falling from the first level of the dungeon to the second, and whenever you gained a level you got more hit points. But understand it or not, we were hooked.

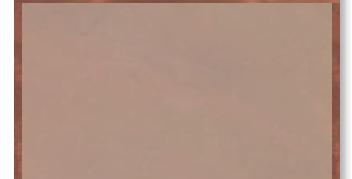
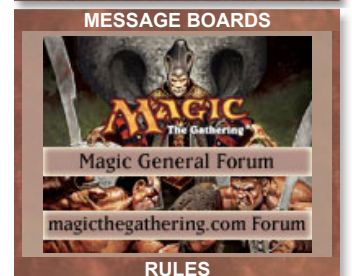
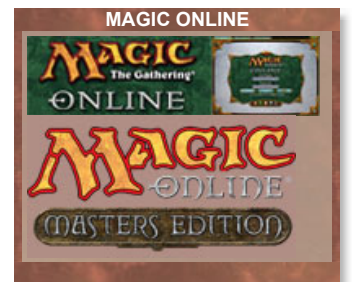
For Christmas in 1983, at the tender age of 11, I received a Dungeon Master's Guide, a Player's Handbook, a Monster Manual, some character sheets, and a set of dice. I was firmly on the path to becoming a hardcore gamer, and with my parents' blessings at that. Within a couple months, I was leading a regular D&D campaign with my brother and three of my good friends.

My parents weren't the only influential people in my life who approved of my growing fascination with games, D&D in particular. My brother and I were both in our school's gifted program, run by a teacher named Audrey Sepesy who really valued games as something that developed thinking and social skills. Many of my sessions with her and the other gifted kids involved games ranging from very logic-based ones to more traditional games. As I moved on to middle and junior high school, some of my other more zealous teachers began railing against D&D as an occult pursuit to me, my friends, and my parents, and Mrs. Sepesy was always there to defend us and our right to play the game.

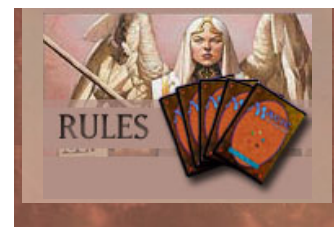
While I was in high school, Mrs. Sepesy arranged for her gifted charges to participate in a local school's "Game Day" competition. Some of us went and played chess, others Scrabble, and others trivia, but I went to play competitive Dungeons & Dragons. Each school sent one Dungeon Master and five players, and each DM was assigned to a group of players from another school. The player groups and DMs were watched and judged by a council of teachers familiar with the game and graded on a variety of factors. My junior year I went as a player (an older kid who I played with on-and-off was our school's DM) and we didn't do that well. For my senior year, however, I went as the DM and finished second in the DM competition, losing only to the kid from the host school who wrote the adventure we were all using. I did well by killing off all the players in my group; I thought they were a bunch of quarreling idiots, they didn't pay attention, didn't listen to what I told them very often, and didn't seem



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to think there should be consequences for bad decisions, so they all died, leaving me to sit there quietly for the last hour, which apparently struck a chord with the judging crew. Our school's bus had to leave early, so I never got my trophy, a regret I still have to this day. But how fabulous it was to get out of school for a day to go play D&D with an auditorium full of the smartest kids in the area. Apparently my experience is not all that common; when I tell the story of D&D competitions to my coworkers, many of whom have dedicated huge portions of their lives to D&D, they don't believe me.



In college at the University of Pittsburgh, I started another D&D campaign with some roommates, my girlfriend at the time, and co-workers from the Pitt News office, and we'd play long into the night at the newspaper office. Eventually I broke up with the girl and moved away from the roommates, and the game dissolved.

I started dating Anne, my future wife, in the months after the D&D game broke up, and I never started playing it again. My college social life was in full swing, and my need for gaming was at least partially satisfied by video games like Madden NFL, Mortal Kombat, and NBA Jam, with rotisserie baseball giving me a competitive outlet and something to talk about all the time. And then, in the summer of 1994, I broke my leg, slowing my social activity to a crawl.

A buddy of mine from the university marching band, Mike Bailey, came by my apartment one day late that summer after a family trip and started telling me about a new game his friend had showed him while on the trip. "I went to visit a friend of mine," he said, "and he had this game I think you'd like called **Magic**." He then went on to explain it to me, noting that it was played with cards and heavily themed like D&D. I wasn't sure I understood exactly what he meant, and he didn't have any of the cards. He told me to be on the lookout for it as he was *sure* I'd enjoy it, and I needed something to do while my leg was all busted up. What a fateful conversation. Mike is now a government AIDS researcher in Washington, DC, and probably hasn't thought about **Magic** in a decade. Can't say the same for me.

A week or so later, I was hobbling by the Comics Crypt, the neighborhood comic shop. They were closed, but in their window was a poster showing nothing but a bunch of illustrated fantasy game cards - a poster for **Magic**.



The cards on the poster had nothing but names, art, and artist credits, but it was enough to grab me. "**Demonic Tutor?**" "**Coal Golem?**" Wow, did that sound cool! Of course, when I went back to the store later, they were sold out, as was every book store I tried within miles. I later found out that this was between the two printings of *Revised*, after *The Dark*, when no product was available for some time.

I had given up looking for the game totally by the fall, but thank goodness my mother, a tenacious shopper, had no quit in her. Ever since I had told about the game and its apparent scarceness she had been on the lookout for it, and in the late fall of 1994 I received a small package in the mail containing one Revised starter deck and one Revised booster pack. I had cards.

I remember those first cards very vividly. The two rares in the starter were **Demonic Attorney** and **Jandor's Ring**. There was a **Rod of Ruin** in there somewhere and an **Ivory Cup**. The cards felt so magically evocative to me, and I had no idea how to play the game.

I knew I needed an opponent in any event, so I sent my roommate Jake Hillman back to the Comics Crypt to see if they had gotten any cards in. They still had no sealed stuff in stock, but did have sets of Revised commons and basic lands for sale in the display case, so that's what Jake came back with. And that's how I spent my first evening playing **Magic**: two five-color decks, starter-plus-boosters versus Revised commons highlander, with the rulebook open on the table at all times as we stumbled through a few games. Regardless of how difficult it was on so many levels, we loved the game.

My brother was in college in Florida at the time and managed to get his hands on some Revised product as well, and we spent hours on the phone reading cards to one another. I specifically remember being jealous that he had cards called "Shivan Dragon" and "Disrupting Scepter" that I had never seen before. As Neil had no one to play against, our discussions of cards on the phone soon turned into attempts to play games remotely, with each of us constantly reciting board positions to one another. Some massive phone bills were racked up.

Soon thereafter, *Fallen Empires* was released and cards were available for purchase once again. Jake and I would each buy stuff and add them to our ever-growing stacks, and we slowly puzzled through most of the rules, me by asking the shopkeeper something each time I stopped by, Jake by reading the fledgling **Magic** internet sites in the computer lab in the Pitt library. We battled and battled, and at some point I made the giant leap to take all the blue, black, and white cards out of my deck. My new, sleek 110-card red-green mess began winning a great number of its games against Jake's teetering polychromatic collection/deck. A door had opened.

One day I stopped by the card shop at the right time, and a half-dozen odd characters were in there actually playing **Magic** against one another. I ran home, grabbed my red-green deck, and ran back. Those first games against strangers were eye-opening in ways that few life experiences are. I was introduced to **Serra Angel** and her good friend **Stasis, Lord of the Pit** and **Breeding Pit, Channel** and **Fireball**. So much became apparent to me in those few hours. Cards worked together in powerful ways. Decks could be built to maximize those interactions. Small deck size allowed for maximum consistency. And buying more cards could solve all your problems.

If I was hooked before, now I was full-on addicted. Jake and I entered into an arms race, with each of us coming home with more packs and cards every day. Decks were built and tuned, trimmed down to fit inside started boxes and stacked on the table in a show of force. Most nights turned into marathons of one-deck-versus-each-of-the-others. We showed the game to other friends, and some of them got involved as well.

The card shop guys tipped me off to the **Magic** Night that happened at the Pitt student union every Tuesday, and when I showed up there the first time, I thought I was in heaven. Table after table of people were there playing, talking, and trading. I played in a few group games and saw all sorts of wonders I hadn't been exposed to before: **Diamond Valley** and **Rukh Egg, Underworld Dreams, Colossus of Sardia, Takklemaggot, The Urzatron, Chaos Orb!** It was all so amazing.

I became a regular attendee at the Pitt **Magic** night, and really enjoyed the casual gaming atmosphere there. All of the decks people played were so creative and wacky, involving cards like **Xenic Poltergeist, Kormus Bell, and Sunglasses of Urza**, and the players themselves were often just as eccentric, an odd mixture of goth, burnout, hardcore hobbyist, and bookish nerd. It was a fun culture to be part of, and it lasted from the days of *Fallen Empires* up until about the time *Urza's Saga* was released before finally drying up.

I was spending every disposable dime I had on **Magic** cards just to play casually in those early days. I really enjoyed the collecting aspect, and wanted to have four of every single card just in case I might need it some day. Once I determined that dual lands were actually powerful cards as opposed to junky rares, I was hellbent on getting all forty. I wrote decklists in class. I drove Anne crazy with constant talk of cards and decks. I was in deep, and then something incredible happened that threatened to pull me in even deeper: Jake and I read that there was going to be a **Magic tournament** at the upcoming Pittsburgh ComiCon. Things were about to change. But that's a story for next time.



Last Week's Poll:

Which would you rather see happen in the future?		
Let me out of this alternate reality, I want to go home!	4777	68.8%
The four-of card limit changed to be the three-of card limit.	1450	20.9%
Deck size increased to be greater than 100.	718	10.3%
Total	6945	100.0%

I thought so!

This Week's Poll:

Which of these nonfiction Magic books would you be most interested in purchasing?

- A narrative history of the game, featuring never-before-told, behind-the-scenes looks at Magic
- An almanac of quizzes, trivia, debates, polls, and puzzles from Magic's history
- A 15-year retrospective of Magic art and artists, showcasing the many planes of Magic's past
- None of these

[Submit my Vote](#)

*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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