



Assume the Acquisition

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Making Magic
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For those of you that have been paying attention, there have been several comments on [magicthegathering.com](#) in the last few weeks about how Wizards is planning in 2008 to have a big push towards acquisition. What exactly does that mean? Why is it necessary? And how does it affect you, the reader (a.k.a. a current **Magic** player)? All these questions will be answered today as I turn my column inwards to explain what exactly is going on behind the scenes (sort of a requirement for a "behind-the-scenes" column). For those of you who like getting an insight into what Wizards, as a company, has to care about, I think you will find today's column especially interesting.

Acquisition Control

I often talk about the needs of **Magic** design. Today I am focusing on the needs of **Magic** as a business. So, in a nutshell, what does **Magic** have to do to succeed? We have to sell product. How do we do that? We create interest from game players by making a product that you all want to spend your hard-earned money on. Another way to say this is that to succeed as a business, Wizards, as a game company, has to find players interested in playing our games; for today's column I am specifically talking about **Magic**. To do this we focus our attention on three primary groups: what we call acquisition, retention, and reacquisition.

Acquisition – This group of people are those who have never played **Magic** before. Our goal with them is to entice them to learn about **Magic**, teach it to them, and then hope that they enjoy it enough to **start playing**.

Retention – This group of people are our current players. Our goal with them is to continue to make a game that interests them such that they **keep playing**.

Reacquisition – This group of people are former players. Our goal with them is to reintroduce them to the game, catch them up on whatever they've missed, and encourage them to **start playing again**. Some people list reacquisition as a subset of acquisition, but as the groups are very different and require different approaches, I'm listing them separately.



The goal for each group is essentially the same: encourage them to play **Magic**. Our challenges (and thus our methods) for each group are radically different. Let's examine them, but to make my point I am going to go in order of difficulty (from easiest to hardest):

Retention – This group is the easiest to please because our goal is the simplest: get them to keep doing what they are currently doing. (Inertia is a potent, potent force.) That said, this is far from a simple task. **Magic's** identity is all about constant redefinition, which means that we have to work hard every year to keep the players on their toes and do things that they don't expect yet still enjoy. But this is what we do, so this category is the least difficult.

Reacquisition – This group comes next because it has a huge jump over the next category. This group knows how to play the game or at least knew how at some point. There are a few big hurdles for this group. First and foremost, something made them leave the game. We have to overcome whatever that was. Second, while there is less education than the acquisition audience, to get this group back we have to get them up to speed on how **Magic** has changed since they last played.

Acquisition – This is by far the hardest category. And note that this doesn't just apply to **Magic**. Acquisition in about any business is harder than retention or reacquisition. Why? Because this audience hasn't yet been convinced that your product is worth their time and money. They might not even know of its existence. And even if they do, the burden is on you to convince them that they'd like the product. Then you have to convince them to sample it. Only then can the quality of your product even come to play. To better understand what this means for **Magic**, let's break this out:

PRODUCTS

MAGIC ONLINE



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RULES



Awareness of the Product: **Magic** is not yet a household name. We've made inroads over the years, but still the majority of Americans (let alone the majority of the world) have never heard of **Magic: The Gathering**. Now things get a little better when you narrow down to the demographics that we aim for. They get better still when you focus down to game players. But even then, there is a significant hurdle to just getting people to know what **Magic** is.

Education of the Product: **Magic** isn't a cola you can just sip. Before you can sample the game, you have to learn it. While **Magic** has many great qualities to it, simplicity of rules is not one. In fact, one of the great lessons we've learned over the years is the importance of not teaching all the rules in the beginning. (Quick aside—when you teach someone how to play, teach them the absolute minimum rules you can so they can play their first game; I mean it, the absolute minimum. If they can get by without knowing something, don't tell them. More on this in a moment.) Note I'm merely talking about the difficulty of the game itself and not the difficulty of teaching the game. These factors are probably the biggest barrier to acquiring new players.

Sampling Time of the Product: Once the person learns the rules, they then have to commit time to playing. An average game with players playing at a brisk speed takes ten to fifteen minutes. A new player committing to playing an entire game will probably spend at least half an hour. Add to that the time to learn the game and that's a lot of commitment to sampling. It isn't two seconds sipping the new cola.

Availability of the Product: Assuming players are able to sample **Magic** and enjoy the experience, we still have to guide them to a place where they can purchase the game. I will point out that if a person has made it this far in the process, there is a higher chance than normal that the player will seek out the product. This is mostly due to the time investment in learning. If you are going to spend thirty-plus minutes learning and sampling, you already demonstrate some affinity for the product. Even with that caveat, there are numerous obstacles between a desire to buy and buying.

As you can see, acquisition for **Magic** is pretty daunting. We do have a few things on our side though:

#1 – Magic is a major force in the gaming world. We are a big fish in our little pond. Game players have a better than average chance of being exposed to **Magic**, especially at game-related venues like game stores.

#2 – A lot of people play (or have played) Magic. The number one way to learn **Magic** is to have another person teach you. Because of the size of **Magic's** current player base, we have a lot of potential ambassadors (also more on this before the column's end).

#3 – Magic is an established game. One of the advantages of being a fifteen-year old game is that all of the infrastructure is in place. We have a well honed organized play system. There are numerous websites (including our own) that focus exclusively (or primarily) on **Magic**. Formats are known quantities. There is a backlog of solid game mechanics and themes. The list goes on and on.

#4 – Wizards of the Coast is one of the biggest game companies (especially for core gaming). This means we have resources that other smaller companies might not.



That is the basic intro to the terminology and the hurdles of our various player groups.

Acquisition Statement

All right, there are three groups that require our attention. Why is acquisition getting the focus this year? To be blunt, it's the group that we feel has the most room for improvement. Over the years, we have gotten very good at retention. We know what our current player base likes and we've gotten pretty good at delivering it. Note this doesn't mean we plan on resting on our laurels just that data shows that we're doing a good job keeping this segment happy. Reacquisition is also doing pretty well. This is helped greatly by having numerous ways to help get lapsed players back into the game (**Magic Online**, **magicthegathering.com**, etc.)

Acquisition, on the other hand, has been getting harder over the years. Why? Let's walk through some of the major obstacles:

#1 – The Environment Has Changed. When **Magic** debuted fifteen years ago, it had a lot less to compete against. Since then everything has changed. The Internet altered how gamers communicate and play. The evolution of gaming has made it more accessible and more mainstream, and thus there's a lot more competition for what we call "mindspace" (the totality of what a single person can think about—this is especially important for core gaming as gaming for this group is as much a lifestyle as a hobby).

#2 – Trading Card Game Awareness Is Heightened. When **Magic** premiered, it was a one-of-a-kind product. **Magic's** success has spawned a deluge of trading card games. So much so, that for many potential players, the main association with trading card games is with a game other than **Magic**. They come to **Magic** not as something innovative but as something derivative. This awareness is a double-edged sword as it both helps and hurts our messaging.

#3 – The Game Is Fifteen Years Old. Magic was daunting when it premiered with almost three hundred cards. The game will pass ten thousand unique cards within the year. The game has ten editions and over fifty expansions. It has over fifty keywords and over a hundred mechanics. It's intimidating.

#4 – The Game Has Complexity Creep. This is a new concept we've been dealing with. Since the early days we've dealt with power creep. That is, sets trying to make themselves better than the last by slightly raising the bar on how powerful the cards are. Unchecked, this causes the game's power to spiral out of control. Recognizing this problem, we have spent many years finding ways to make new cards relevant without relying on power creep. Complexity creep works in a similar matter. We do something. We do it again. And again. Eventually it seems so commonplace that we start building on it. Over time, this causes us to slowly inch up complexity.

The problem is that if this is left unchecked, it makes it harder for new people to learn as the game just has a higher barrier to entry. The best recent example of this phenomenon would be *Time Spiral* block. To the retention players, it was a nostalgic romp through **Magic's** past. To acquisition players, it was fifty-plus brand new keywords mixed together with a theme that didn't resonate and thus couldn't help them understand how things interconnected. This is a very complex and intriguing topic that I'm sure I will cover in more depth in a future column.

In short, time and inertia have made the game less accessible to new players than it once was. Our goal this year is to find ways to help make the game more accessible without sacrificing the qualities that keep the retention players playing.

What's Your Acquisition?

Which brings us to the following question: Why should you, the reader and current player, care about any of this? What does acquisition have to do with you? Everything—that is, if you're at all invested in the future of the game. Acquisition is the "new blood" that keeps the game refreshed. As I often say, R&D treats **Magic** as a classic game that's going to last a long, long time. To make sure that happens, we have to be ever vigilant about acquisition. Thus, our focus.

Remember, the more people that play **Magic**, the healthier the game is. More players means more money for us to invest in growing the game and adding new features. It means more choices and more options. A healthy game is good for everyone who plays.

This is why I'm going to take a moment to explain why all of you are one of the most important tools we have for acquisition. Do you know what has the highest degree of success in getting a player over the initial hump of learning the game? Having it taught to them by a close friend or family member whose invested in **Magic**. As I learned in my Hollywood days, the best way to pitch something is with honest enthusiasm. When people see you're excited, they get excited. **Magic** can be very daunting to learn. That is why a reassuring teacher is so crucial.



In fact, as long as I'm on this topic, let me share a few tips for those of you out there that would like to teach someone new how to play **Magic**.

#1 – Keep It Simple. As I mentioned above, the biggest mistake people make when teaching new players is to teach them more than the need to know to start. Once a player is invested, they are much more motivated to explore the game. Your goal when teaching is to give them just enough that they can start playing. A corollary of this rule is that you shouldn't teach a beginner with random cards. Carefully pick out what you show them to help keep things as simple as possible. If you feel uncomfortable building a deck, I highly recommend the *Tenth Edition* Theme Decks for teaching new players.

#2 – Start Playing Quickly. Speaking of which: **Magic** is a game. It's a fun game. That is the most compelling thing about it. This means get the cards in their hands and get them playing as quick as you can. Don't try to explain everything ahead of time. Get started and teach them as you play. And remember, don't teach them things until they need to know them. The greatest thing about teaching as you play is that you can explain things as they naturally come up. This greatly increases the chance of the new player grasping why a certain part of the game matters. They get to learn about it when it's relevant.

#3 – Don't Worry About Them Making Mistakes. Another common error is to correct every mistake the new player makes. Don't do this. If they have things slightly wrong, don't worry about it. The goal isn't to have them master **Magic** after one game. It's to give them a taste of what the game is about, to give them a positive first impression. Being constantly reminded why what they're doing is wrong doesn't accomplish this. In fact, it only reinforces the number one concern new players have: that they aren't getting it. Also, another mistake in this category—don't worry about teaching strategy in the first few games. Strategy isn't useful until you are ready for it. Frontloading it just makes the game seem that much more complex.

#4 – Make Sure They're Having Fun. The goal of the first game isn't to get them to understand everything, it's to get them to have fun. **Magic** is a game. Games are played primarily because they

are entertaining. If the new player isn't entertained, your chance of getting them to play again is practically nil.

#5 – Expand Upon What They Like. I have taught a lot of people how to play **Magic**. The number one skill I've learned is this: watch what aspects they are enjoying and then focus on those. If they are intrigued by the art, I let them look at lots of cards. If they are interested in the colors of **Magic**, I start explaining the color wheel. If they seem to enjoy attacking with creatures, I focus on that part of the game. The goal, once again, is to give them a positive experience with the game. Everything else will come if they choose to keep playing. And if they don't, it doesn't matter what they've learned.



#6 – Give Them Cards (Preferably a Deck). In sales, I believe they call this a "walk away." The best way to keep someone invested is to make part of it theirs. Don't just show them the game. Give them the game. One of **Magic's** strongest attributes is the "stickiness" of the cards. That is, they are fascinating to look at and touch. As a quick aside, one of the things I like to do when I start teaching is to first let them look at the cards, just give them some time to take them in. With only one or two exceptions in my fifteen years of teaching **Magic**, this has always led to the person being more interested in learning. Just make sure not to get bogged down explaining things that won't matter until later (see #1 above). My point is that teaching doesn't have to stop when the first game ends. By giving them cards, you are extending the experience beyond just the moment.

While this list is far from comprehensive, it does hit the highpoints.

No One Expects the Spanish Acquisition

So this is what we're up to. We've realized that acquisition deserves some attention and so every part of the company (at least the parts that deal with **Magic**) is taking time to look at what they do and examine how they could make their aspect of the game more acquisition friendly. This is also a theme I will be revisiting in this column throughout the year. As always, I would love to hear from any of you if you have suggestions in how we could help make the game more acquisition-friendly. I am particularly interested to hear from players who have recently (in the last six months or so) learned how to play. What could have made your experience learning **Magic** better?

That's all I got for today. Join me next week when I talk about some giant leaps in **Magic** design.

Until then, may you know the joy of sharing something you love with another.

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*Mark Rosewater is Head **Magic** Designer. What this fancy title means is that he's in charge of **Magic** design. This gets him a lot of mail (which he actually reads). When not alternatively destroying and saving **Magic**, he likes to spend time with his family, do stereotypically geeky things (play games, read comics, watch a lot of science fiction, etc.) and write about himself in third person.*



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