

How Did You Start Playing Magic Search

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That is a question I ask all my interview subjects, and the answer is invariably some number of moments after the first time that person stepped inside of a dedicated gaming establishment. While gaming stores are commonplace now, that was not always the case in the early days of **Magic**—and stumbling into one of those special enclaves was an epiphanous **experience akin to finding an extended family of gamers you never knew you had.**

In the book *Jonny Magic and the Card Shark Kids*, author David Kushner described a pivotal moment in Jon Finkel's life when the future greatest player in the history of the game was a lonely teenager living in England. Bicycling home from school, Jon discovered a store called Fun and Games and met a store owner playing a brand new card game called Magic: The Gathering. To say that Jon's life was forever changed the moment he crossed the threshold into Fun and Games would be the height of understatement.

In an interview I conducted about the history of Magic in Japan, Masashiro Kuroda (the first Japanese player to even win a Pro Tour) did not select a Magic player when asked to name the person who had the most significant impact on Magic in his country. Virtually every other player in the roundtable discussion had selected Tsuyoshi Fujita or Kuroda himself, but Kuroda realized that there would not be any players without a place for them to play.

"The late Muneo Shibata," said Kuroda when the question was put to him. "Many years ago, there were only three Level 3 judges in Japan, and he was one of them. He opened a card shop called 'Adept' in Osaka, and worked hard to train young players so they could compete on an international level. Among Adept 'graduates' are Tsuyoshi Fujita, Masahiko Morita, Osamu Fujita, Shuhei Nakamura, and myself. If it hadn't been for him, we wouldn't be here. My lasting regret is that none of us were able to get a title while he was still alive."

Last year I had the opportunity to travel to Amsterdam to report on the 10th anniversary of the Grand Prix program as part of that event's coverage. Throughout the weekend there was a thread that weaved through every story about the history of Dutch Magic community. Whether it was Bram Snepvangers putting on the metaphorical striped shirt of the Magic judging community (long before there was a literal one) or the continuity of a Monday night draft over more than a decade that saw just about every prominent Dutch Magic player crack a pack, that sense of belonging grew the player base to lofty heights.

"There was a tournament that was run in Amsterdam every Monday that is still being run," Sven Djit, the owner of the excellent manamaze.com website, explained during the Grand Prix in Amsterdam, which came ten years after he reached the Top 8 of that very first Grand Prix.

Wessel Oomens, who was also in that long-ago Top 8, explained that regular draft night was a proving ground for players like himself, Noah Boeken, and Alexander Witt.

"Years later with Julien Nuijten at the Monday draft, I said, 'Julien, come play with the good players,' " Oomens continued. "A half a year later he was the World Champion. Rogier Maaten and I immediately took him into our team because we recognized his skill. It really helped him a lot ... of course it helped us as well."



This story is repeated all over the world, on every continent that Magic is played. I recently caught up with Brazilian superstar Paulo Vitor Damo da Rosa to see how his Magic experience started, and sure enough it began many years ago in a card shop called Jambô.

Oomens has deep roots in the Dutch Magic scene.

"It was the only store that sold Magic in my city, and people were very nice there," said Paulo. "There was one guy specifically—the son of the guy who owned the store—who kind of 'adopted' me. I was around 8 at the time. I was naturally attracted to the game and the people were nice, helped me with building decks and introduced me to the tournaments, so I just kept coming back."

Rafael Svaldi is the son of the owner and he pretty much runs the shop now, according to Paulo: "He became a judge and gradually brought the premier events to the store. He is now the only Level 3 judge in Brazil, so we get lots of tournaments we wouldn't otherwise. The whole family has a publishing house now for RPG books in Portuguese.

"I don't think I'd have a career at all if that store didn't exist," Paulo continued. "It was the thing that introduced me to competitive play and for many years my only source of that competitive play. The many friends I made there also helped."

Despite all of his Pro Tour success the store remains Paulo's base of operations to this day and his playgroup—and the way they interact with each other—is pretty much unchanged.

"I'm sure the fact that I've been to Pro Tours and it all started in the same PTQs they are now playing gives them something to aim for, but other than that, I think I have a normal relationship with all the players," said Paulo of his local community. "Most of them have been around for longer than I've been to Pro Tours, so they know me from a time where I was just an FNMer and the way we act towards each other remains the same."



Here in the New York area I have been very active in the Magic community as one of the founding partners of both Neutral Ground and Gray Matter Conventions, and I have had the pleasure of being on the other

Paulo credits a local store for his start in Magic.

side of that player relationship for about as long as anyone. I have forged great friendships and had the pleasure to see many of my local players go on to win at every level of competition. Since selling my interest in both organizations, I have been able to continue to enjoy them as a player with a regular group that gets together a couple of times a week to draft and playtest Constructed (a.k.a. more drafting).

Before we ever ran that very first tournament in 1994 for a complete set of *Arabian Nights*—which eventually led to the opening of Neutral Ground a few month later—there were only a handful of stores running tournaments. That's why it came as such a shock a few weeks back when my friend Kevin An informed me that one of the East Coast's true gamers, Barron Vangor Toth, had passed away.

Barron was the owner of Barron's Comics and Cards, and had been running Magic tournaments since the earliest days of the Duelists Convocation International (now known simply as the DCI) and literally towered over the Connecticut Magic scene. After selling his store, Barron went on to be an accomplished game designer and prolific poker columnist. For the players who knew him back then, he will always be first and foremost a pioneer of the East Coast Magic scene.

"For me, Barron was the one who created the Magic community in Connecticut," said Kevin An. "He opened the store back in 1994, the same year I started playing. I am very certain I wouldn't be playing the game today if it weren't for him and his store. I made friends there that I still talk to—and did—this day."

Looking back, Kevin recalled first hearing of a comic store one town over from a friend and having that friend's mom take them to scope it out: "They sold singles there, people would play there...there was even a big back room set up with tables for playing, long boxes of comics, and arcade games in the back. Eventually, gaming at the store progressed into Thursday night Constructed tournaments, where the tournament would bring over 40 people a week.

"It was a very close-knit environment, where nicknames would sprout out of nowhere (we used to call one of the guys One-Eye, from the first book) and people would groan when Harry played his red-green burn deck with Black Vises. He also had a thing during the summer where over the course of a few months, the winners from each week would eventually play in the format-unknown-until-the-day-of Tournament of Champions. I'm pretty sure it was some crazy Grand Melee. First place even got a trophy."

Kevin found himself deeply affected by loss of the man who indoctrinated him and many of his friends into the game that still plays a central role in his life almost 15 years later. He tried to find some way to express that loss that would be fitting for an inveterate gamer like Barron.

"Barron was an intensely private person, and I would be lying if I said we were great friends," Kevin admitted. "But he certainly was a friend, someone I knew for years and at a time saw almost every other day. He eventually came to sell his store to a Magic player named Dan McNeill, so it'd been a while since I heard of him. I did know he was a busy bee, so to hear of his passing came as quite a shock. To hear of anyone passing away is always upsetting, but I think what affected me the most, was to learn upon reflection how Barron and his store was so much a larger part of my young adulthood than I previously thought."

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Kevin got together with Tim Moran, another Barron's veteran, and came up with the idea of a memorial draft tournament at Barron's Comics and Cards on Saturday, April 5. Fittingly the format for the draft will utilize older blocks—*Odyssey/Torment/Judgment* and

— Kevin An

Onslaught/Legions/Scourge—and the Top 8 will cut to an *Invasion* block draft. The entry fee is \$35 and all the entry fees above the cost of the product will be donated to charity in Barron's name.

"It started out as just getting some of the people together, some of the older players," Kevin explained. "It then grew into a gaming night, and then into a tournament. When I think of the old days, I think of all the good times. So the least we could do for him and the love of gaming was to try to do something worthy to bring the two together and do it in his name.

"Well, first and foremost I expect people to have fun, reminisce, and just have a positive weekend," said Kevin when asked about what he hoped would come out of the event. "It's going to be great to see all those old faces. But I'm also hoping for the people who didn't know Barron but played at the store, or even didn't know him to show up and play. It's going to be a great tournament! Andy Reed, the current owner of the store, has been fantastic about this whole event and behind us 100 percent for which I am grateful. All of the profits from this are going to be donated in Barron's name, so it's going to be a really cool way for us to honor him."

So how will Kevin remember Barron?

"I think it would be proper if he was remembered as someone who was a great contributor to the things he cared about, and as someone who knew the value of his own opinion," he said. "One of my favorite things actually is an old tournament report Barron wrote way back in '98, about the road trip to play Magic at Origins that was published on The Dojo. It was so well written and entertaining, you didn't even realize until someone points it out at the end that not a single game of Magic was even mentioned during it."

The event is going to be open to anyone who knew Barron or who loves gaming and wants to honor a true gamer.

Barron Memorial Draft Tournament

Saturday, April 5

Barron's Comics & Cards

174 Cherry St, Milford, CT 06460

(203) 783-1630

Start time: Noon

Format: *Odyssey/Torment/Judgment* and *Onslaught/Legions/Scourge* Swiss-round Booster Draft Tournament, with *Invasion/Planeshift/Apocalypse* single-elimination Top 8

Cost: \$35

Firestarter: How did you start playing Magic?

So in what store did you start playing Magic? Who taught you how to play and introduced you to tournament Magic? Share your reminiscences in the forums.

