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Greeting from Las Vegas! I was in the desert this past week to attend GAMA, an annual industry trade show where gaming manufacturers, retailers, and tournament organizers meet to share upcoming releases, new initiatives, and discuss the state of the industry. One of the highlights for many retailers and organizers was an opportunity to hear Jesse Decker, Director of Organized Play for Wizards of the Coast, discuss the new Wizards Play Network, which was announced here on Monday.

After Jesse was done talking to a standing room-only hall of retailers, I sat down with him to find out what this new initiative means for **Magic** players of all stripes, from casual to competitive.

BDM: What is the Wizards Play Network?

Jesse: It is a label for local play of any stripe. In particular it is representative of a new arrangement between Wizards and the local community organizers. We will empower them to do whatever is effective in terms of play formats to support and grow their local community, and provide them with some rewards. The only thing we ask in return is some low-level visibility—meaning reporting—into that activity so we know the rewards are going to the players. It represents more freedom for those organizers and more support for whatever they want to do.

I often talk about leagues and multi-player as examples of casual formats that we haven't particularly supported in the past. It is not to say that the tournament activities that have been our focus for so long are being reduced—far from it, they are all staying in place—but the lower organizer levels of the Wizards Play Network in particular are aimed at this idea of "play in whatever formats your community finds to be fun and we will support that."

BDM: I think the answers to this question are sprinkled throughout your last answer but I want to get more specific. What are the overarching goals of the Wizards Play Network?

Jesse: Putting resources in the hands of the folks who are building play communities and trusting that they know how to build those communities. There are some subsidiary or side goals in that we have heard retailers talk about the demands of our reporting structures and we want to address those concerns. We have heard players say, "Hey, I like this competitive thing on Friday night, but I would also like a different kind of experience from time to time." So addressing existing feedback is definitely one of the goals behind the network.

BDM: We are talking about Magic here?

***"[The Wizards Play Network] represents more freedom for [community] organizers and more support for whatever they want to do."—
Jesse Decker***

Jesse: Magic is definitely the focus for 2008 but the Wizards Play Network is a multi-brand initiative. Wizards Play Network organizers will organize miniatures play. They will organize RPG play but when I look at it—particularly the next six months—I think of it as a Magic initiative.

BDM: *How does this affect the player reading this at home?*

Jesse: A fine question. If you are looking for a specific kind of play experience, for example multi-player or league, let your organizer know.

BDM: *When you throw around words like "grassroots" it has to be a little scary for store-based organizers.*

Jesse: I can understand some trepidation from a retailer but I certainly don't see it that way. Anytime you talk about things changing people get nervous. The gaming industry tends to be a conservative lot. The retailers who are aware of their community have a lot to gain from the kinds of support that we are going to offer. The energized and committed player has a lot to gain if there is not a retail space to play in nearby. The Wizards Play Network will support gaming clubs outside of the retail space. Now, there will still be retail exclusive content. We will be very clear about what is and isn't retail exclusive.

If the nearest game store is 100 miles away, that is not a realistic weekly drive. So form a weekly group near your immediate friends and drive to your retailer for bigger events like Release Tournaments and those sorts of things.

BDM: *Why has it become important for Wizards to make this a priority? There have certainly been a lot of resources uprooted from other Organized Play areas and resodded onto this play initiative.*

Jesse: I think of this as a natural swing of the pendulum. We have had a lot of success with emphasizing our Premier Events and our premier play programs. We have made stars out of Magic players, we have energized communities with nearby Grand Prix, PTQ or whatever kind of event. Those things are working and working very well for us. Now we have some bandwidth to shift our attention in a slightly different direction.

"The retailers who are aware of their community have a lot to gain from the kinds of support that we are going to offer."—Jesse Decker

There are a lot of entertainment options available these days and gaming is one of many compelling forms of entertainment. I firmly believe in gaming and its strengths and one of the best ways to ensure that it continues versus movies, individual games, networked video games—whatever you want to talk about—is making sure there is a rich community around game play. That means lots of local communities with proper geographic coverage so that if you want to participate in a thing like this, there is a good group of folks you can play with who are not too far away from you.

BDM: *What do you say to players who are upset that programs like the MSS, Champs, or — if you look at a smaller subset of players—the loss of a Pro Tour. I am assuming this is where a lot those resources have gone. What can you say to those players to assuage their fears that their area of Magic is going to be less and less important as grassroots focused Magic becomes more prominent?*

Jesse: I can say that I and the folks that I work with are very much committed to retaining premier play. I think we as a group have premier play in a very good situation. We have good messaging behind it and tell compelling stories about it. We have lots of players who are, as you say, very much engaged in those activities. We have no intent to diminish them or reduce them.

We made the changes that we made at the beginning of this year because we felt that the pendulum had swung in one direction and we wanted to free up resources to devote to the other direction. But we have made those changes and we are committed to the course we are on right now. I think that both levels are going to be properly supported.

BDM: *How does the Wizards Play Network play into Mark Rosewater's recent talk about the buzzword of 2008—acquisition?*

Jesse: I want more folks to play Magic. So acquisition is a fine word in my vocabulary, but I think that Organized Play is not particularly in itself an acquisition tool. I think of acquisition more in terms of an ad campaign or a friend getting you to play Magic. So if you are Magic-curious and you find our locator...I view the Wizards Play Network as a comfortable and inviting place for you to land as an interested player. Wizards will drive this acquisition, we will spend the money on ads, we'll do those things that we think pique a new player's interest in Magic. The organizers will meet us on the other side of that by providing a place for these folks to go to meet new friends, learn how to play Magic—Magic players are in general willing to teach other people how to play Magic. That is not a new thing, that happens at Friday Night Magic all the time. Wizards Play Network is a way of us talking about the group of locations with one name.

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BDM: *Can you talk about the details of tools you will be making available, organizer levels, and other specifics you started to address during your presentation?*

Jesse: An organizer level is essentially the requirements that we would like to see you fulfill to be matched with a specific play opportunity; particularly as you climb up the ladder towards our premier play activities. When we talk about organizer levels it is an acknowledgement to the fact that for me to send you some promo cards to reward you players for coming regularly to your casual multi-player game, I don't need a lot of visibility into that. I need a little but not a ton. On the other hand when you get to the point where you are giving away cash prizes and plane tickets to Pro Tour events, we need a tremendous amount of visibility. We also need to deliver the fair and level playing experience. The levels address those things. We should have an announcement about those levels by mid-May.

BDM: *What do you think the most common misconceptions you have encountered about Magic and Magic Organized Play in talking to retailers this week?*

Jesse: That you can only run it on Friday. FNM is a wonderful, wonderful program but it is not the only thing we offer. Wizards has prize support that is right now called the DCI Tournament Support Kit, but it will be called the Wizards Play Network Participation Kit. That will facilitate whatever kind of play you on whatever day you want. We have resources that are available to you that are not on Friday night.

BDM: *So if I want to run a local Sealed Deck-Anaconda Draft-Grand Melee every Thursday at my local library I can get that officially supported? How does that happen?*

Jesse: Sign up at <http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=dc/wopn>. If you are not currently running Magic OP programs you should go to this url and fill in the webform. We will then contact you with further updates in the progressing year.

BDM: *What if I don't have a judge?*

Jesse: I guess the second most common misconception is that you have to have a judge. Running tournaments, and particularly with these casual formats that we are introducing, you don't need a judge. You need an organizer. They can't play in a competitive tournament, but for casual formats the organizer can play.

BDM: *What kind of promo cards will be available in these kits?*

Jesse: Very similar to the DCI Tournament Support Kits, where they are set driven and there is a rotation of support promo cards that come in brand new with each set. Friday Night Magic promo cards have been Extended and will continue to be for the short term. This year it is changing to Standard, but FNM cards are not tied to the set that is being emphasized and was most recently released. These cards will be. These cards will always point at the most recent release.

BDM: *There was one person who took part in the Q&A after your presentation who was already organizing a group of players at his local library—in excess of 90 players. If you look at the bio line for The Ferrett, he mentions his weekly play group that he hosts. What does this mean for people already engaged in this pattern of play?*

Jesse: In particular those organizers can get support from us that they have not previously been able to. Those players can get that same support through their organizer. When we launch the Gleemax utilities, they will be able to have a social group with specific characteristics that let them coordinate their activity. We will give them some digital tools to build that group.

BDM: *What do you expect one year out from now? What questions will you be fielding from this same group at GAMA next year?*

Jesse: We are very much in a phase of "What can we do next? What can we talk about next?" The digital resources that we talk about in vague terms will be out. We'll be talking about specific feedback on what is working and not working. We will be talking about phase two of this revision process. I am using examples like leagues and multi-player right now but I am hoping to have other examples.

BDM: *What are some of the tools you have mentioned?*

Jesse: First is an improved store and game locator; that is in June. Second is a reporting tool that lowers the difficulty of reporting certain formats; particularly these "pick whatever you want to play" activities of the network. Then an improved version of DCI reporter towards the end of this year—Q3 or early Q4—and the final piece of the whole initiative being in place is Gleemax itself. The networking ability it will give players and organizers to reach one another and to discuss, "Hey I would like this kind of format on this day. Can you put it on your calendar so I can show up?"

That roll-out of tools is very much what I think of as the roll-out of the whole network.

Firestarter: Dealer's Choice

When you play Magic with your friends, what formats do you play? Do you play draft? Multi-player? Cube? Head to the forums and share your local play group's favorite formats.

