Magic: The Gathering (Garfield, 1993), or MtG/Magic for short, is a card game developed in 1993 by

Richard Garfield. While at first this game seems to be no more significant than the games like

Klondike and Blackjack which have been played for years, upon close examination and application of

a number of ludic theories we can see that MtG is actually representative of a new generation of

games. It is the permeable nature of its game space and embedded narrative, bearing in mind that

the game is run as an ongoing hobby rather than a one-time purchase, which make it a member of a

distinctive group of emerging games set apart from their conceptual ancestors.

Figure 1 *MtG card with flavour text (italics, at bottom)*

The first way in which Magic sets itself apart from traditional card games is through embedded narrative. Magic's cards contain 'flavour text' - small pieces of text, which when combined with card titles and artwork help to contextualise the card's name and mechanics. Furthermore, cards are released in 'sets' which comprise 'cycles'. This, in particular, makes the parallel between the embedded narrative of MtG cards and traditional sagas such as the Nibelungenlied very explicit.

Flavour text places each card into the cycle as representative of an actor or event within the overall

narrative of the set or the cycle, and in some rare cases the entire narrative continuum of the game

setting. However Magic's flavour text has been designed such that it can fit into normal gameplay as

well. The implication of this is that we have the explicit narrative of a game being constucted as a

sequence of its events, but we also have a secondary narrative underpinning that, due to the

reinforcing nature of the card art and flavour text telling their own story which becomes interwoven

with the explicit subjective narrative of both players. For example, if the card in figure 1 was played

onto the battlefield, it represents the mechanic of a player increasing the relative strength of his

army; but in terms of narrative it signifies all of the player's slain creatures rising up as a horrific undead creature to attack again.

The canonical story of each set and cycle contributes to the global game storyline, but each individual battle through its use of story and art also contributes to each player's narrative context. Both individual experience and canonical storyline form a narrative economy that each player transacts in, even through the simple act of selecting which cards to use in their deck.

Secondly, the nature of consumption and participation of this game affords us the use of the Magic Circle (Castronova, 2005) as the second ludic framework to explain player behaviour and the permeable distinction between the game space and the area outside of it.

Firstly the physical context in which the game is conducted is such that it deliberately sets the space of the game apart. Playing mats and surfaces accomplish two functions, firstly they help to protect the cards, but secondly they provide visual, physical differentiation between the space in which the game occurs and that outside.

Words, too, help to frame this distinction between spaces - the area of the table containing the cards is referred to as a totally different space, the 'battlefield' upon which certain rules and mechanics supersede those of our world.

However, as stated in Castronova's "Synthetic Worlds"(2005), this distinction is somewhat permeable, and has been so to varying degrees since the game's inception. Cards have intrinsic value based upon their effect on the battlefield, and this changes gameplay. Periodically the game's publisher releases additional sets of cards, slowly shuffling the existing cards away from being tournament legal. What this means is that external market forces have significant impact on the game dynamics for a number of reasons. Firstly the actual game mechanics are moved in and out of tournament legal play as the cards which implement them are moved through that context of the game, and this consequently affects the game dynamics. Secondly as cards have the aforementioned

intrinsic value it may not be practical or financially feasible for a player to include those cards and mechanics in their deck. This may not change the game rules but it certainly affects the cost of tournament entry and the mechanics used in that context as a result.

Thirdly, a mechanic known as Ante has been present in the game to varying forms since its start, and this involves each player randomly risking one card from their deck with the winner taking the loser's card in a crude form of betting. This mechanic also affords us an opportunity to use a third ludic framework to examine MtG - that of the 'taxonomy of play'.

Callois' taxonomy (1961) breaks gameplay down into a number of categories with specific characteristics which can be applied to Magic.

Firstly there is alea, or chance. There are a number of mechanics in MtG which leverage randomisation to generate gameplay. Firstly, the card order in each player's deck is shuffled, generating a new sequence of mechanics thanks to the reordered cards (and subsequently a randomised player-subjective narrative across those cards).

Secondly there is a group of card abilities (player-activated mechanics) which cause effects to happen to a random card, or a random player. These further increase the probability space of each individual game and help to therefore increase variability in gameplay and subsequently, fun.

The second element of Callois' taxonomy which can be applied to MtG is agon, or competitiveness. There is a direct element of this in MtG's core concept, i.e. players compete to be the last man standing, as opposed to players cooperating together for a common goal.

These elements further interact with the Magic Circle by increasing the permeability of the demarcation between in game and out; because players acquire cards by purchasing randomized packs, and the cards have varying value, players effectively compete on who has the best luck with the cards they acquire. This is particularly noticeable in tournament formats known as Drafts where

players do not prepare for their games in advance but purchase a fixed number of random packs with which to construct a deck and play in the tournament.

By extending the competitive aspects of the game out into the space not normally considered part of it, the demarcation is rendered permeable.

This is not to say MtG is without flaws, however. The simple fact that cards have an intrinsic value creates competitiveness, true, as has been outlined above; constantly changing which cards are legal for tournament play makes good business sense. However it also introduces a significant amount of disparity amongst players, as it restricts their cards based on disposable income. There is considerable debate amongst the player community as to the role cards play, as opposed to player skill, in determining the outcome of a game; however it is indisputable though that it plays *some* role. Therefore, by pegging the availability of cards and their mechanics to some other metric, such as player performance, we eliminate unrelated socio-economic factors from having a major impact on the game. Spectromancer (Stankovich, 2008), another card-based game, also co-designed by Richard Garfield, implements this well by simply giving everybody the same pool of cards, and each player is simply given a random subset of those each new game.
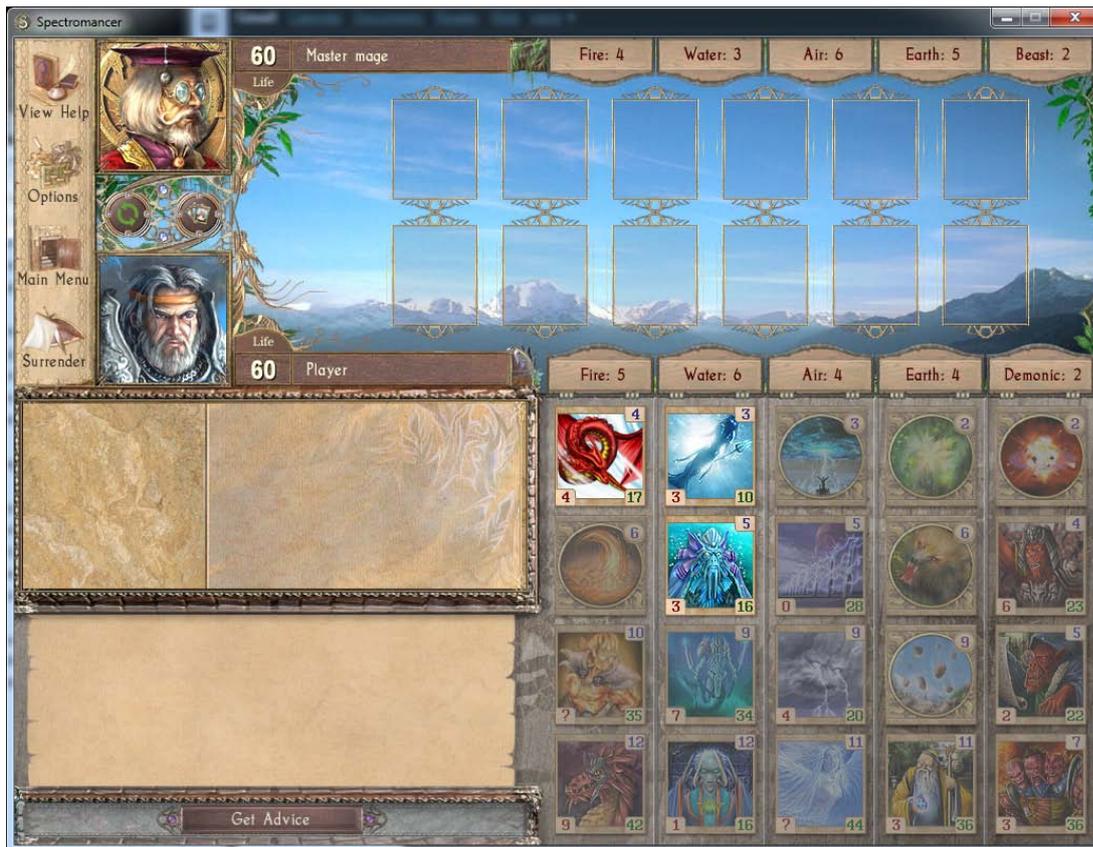
Figure 2 Spectromancer Game Screen showing player's current subset of cards

Furthermore, while there is a significant embedded narrative within each game of MtG, and a global narrative communicated through card text and artwork, there is limited scope for extended gameplay over a series of games. Rather than the current situation which treats each game as a snapshot as it were of the global narrative, the game has scope for increased player engagement through the creation of (optional) campaigns which would thematically tie the small narratives of each game together and provide for increased variation of gameplay through altering core mechanics.

Despite these flaws, however, MtG remains the standard-bearer of sorts for new card games. By adding in narrative, and allowing the game space to be permeable, the publisher has been able to truly create a sense within players that they are never fully dissociated from the game, enhancing its ability to be a hobby rather than simply an outlet for play which has no ongoing significance.

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