



The author arrives for a journey into a world he never made.

Magic Mayhem

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An account of the Magic: The Gathering National Tournament in Chicago

August 1–3, the same weekend that the Magic: The Gathering National Finals tournament descends upon Chicago's McCormick Place Convention Center, the attached Hyatt Regency hotel hosts a Masonic convention, Lollapalooza-goers, and something called the Black Women's Expo. It's not surprising—Magic: The Gathering does just that: It gathers people together.

The magic's had its effect on me: I'm in Chicago, bearing witness to the tournament that boasts a collection of the United States' most competitive and innovative spell-casters and creature-summoners. They're waging battle, all in the name of making new friends, going home with cool stuff, and for some, lining their wallets with cash.

Of course, they'll probably just use the money to buy more Magic cards.

And 15 years of the game has produced a lot of Magic cards: 46 sets at last count, with "Eventide" the most recent. Each set produces 150 cards, and new sets hit three or four times a year. This weekend, I learn that Wizards of the Coast, Magic's publisher, will soon release "Shards of Alara," the latest, greatest Magic set yet, slated for October. "Shards" emphasizes the story elements of the Magic-multiverse, a game aspect that usually takes a backseat to play mechanics and strategy. While every card features an image of what the card represents, and descriptions of what it does, the story line's been a hodgepodge of fantasy and mythology. With "Shards," all that will change, with beings known as the "Planeswalkers" taking center stage to offer gamers concrete characters with whom they can connect. Wizards plans a media blitz along with the new set, including web comics and novels, and part of

Christian Anderson (left) tries to pass the benefits of his wisdom on to the author (right), who is struggling to remain conscious.





This goblin made sure no unruly gamers got out of line.

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construction. Furthermore, there are five different colors that all the cards fall under—white, red, blue, green and black—and the color chosen vastly affects game play. Red-fire cards are destructive, while blue-water are tricky and control opponents' decks—or at least, that's what I've gleaned from my crash course in all things Magic. The rules are simpler than they seem, but to get really good, you need serious brains.

"To play Magic at this level, and play well, you have to be really smart," says Martin Pearce, my contact representing Wizards of the Coast. Martin, who I met on Friday after landing in Chicago, serves as the weekend's guide for me and my friend photographer Collin David, shepherding us to and from each interview, and providing an overview as to what this 15-year phenomenon is all about.

Martin informs me that Richard Garfield, Magic's creator, has a Ph.D. in math—and most folks who've qualified for the Nationals likely have higher-education backgrounds in similar fields. So people like me—literature nerds with liberal arts backgrounds—may learn to appreciate the game, but chances are, my inability to add without using my fingers will hinder my climbing the ladder to Magic stardom.

Despite my slim chances at championship victory, Martin sets me up with Christian Anderson, whom he's dubbed "unofficial pro-tour morale officer."

He's not kidding—Christian, a repair/maintenance specialist for a Toronto logistics company (another one of those "smart people" in large supply here), oozes enthusiasm. He volunteers at the tournament's "learn to play" booth, where he and other dedicated volunteers teach n00bs like me. Christian greets everyone arriving at the booth like an old friend, and his passion for playing is infectious.

I sit down to learn the game after two plane rides and two hours of sleep, so he has his work cut out for him. Despite my cries of exhaustion and confusion, Christian stays patient. He provides a tip I employ throughout the weekend: Make sure you have plenty of mana (the resources, or "money," you tap to summon monsters, cast enchantments and basically do anything).

"If you don't put money in the bank, what're you gonna do when the bills come?" he asks. In this case, of course, the "bills" are monsters who want to eat your head.

After my tutorial, I retreat to my room to rest before Super Friday Night Magic, an event where players of all levels compete to win prizes, like iPods, computers...and more Magic cards. Running from 6 p.m. to 3 a.m., the event is open to anyone who wants to throw down, myself included.

Waking from my nap, I peek at some cards I've acquired...and to my surprise, I have an inkling as to what they mean. Unfortunately, my mediocre and rudimentary knowledge of Magic's basics and terminology doesn't stop me from getting my ass handed to me—repeatedly.

I participate in an eight-person booster draft, consisting of me and seven others receiving three 15-card booster packs of cards. I open each pack, choose one card, then pass the rest down, receiving cards passed from players adjacent to me. Eventually, decks constructed, play begins.

My one and only opponent for the evening is Martin. Martin is perfectly nice. He also happens to hail originally from Hamburg, Germany, and also happens to have a low speaking voice. So when Martin casts spells summoning giants, which knock the bejesus out of me and my creatures, I'm ill-equipped to challenge him on the whole thing—or at the very least, learn what's being done to me. I promptly lose our best of three matches with a record of 0–2. But

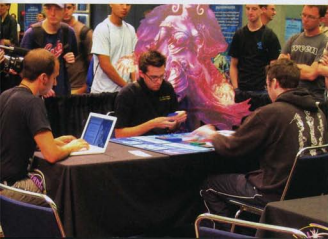
generating that buzz is giving fans the opportunity to come together and become a part of the game's world.

To that end, participants in the weekend's events meet with game designers, card artists, veterans of the tournament circuit, and most importantly, other players just like them, against whom they hone strategies, decks and social skills.

Two hundred and eighteen pro-players compete in the finals, battling to qualify for the top eight slots of the elimination competition on Sunday. The ultimate purpose: score a spot on the American team at December's World Championship, and walk home with the \$5,000 grand prize (and a sweet-looking trophy).

The game's basic goal is reducing your opponent's life from 20 to zero. To do that, players "tap their mana" to summon creatures, who, upon arrival in play, experience "summoning sickness," and...wait. I've lost you, haven't I? Stop turning the page. You don't want to read about that movie anyway. I heard it sucks. For serious.

Bottom line: Despite card games' requisite elements of luck, Magic is seriously strategy-based. It's all about using resources and strategic deck





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I do so in record time. At losing, I’m the pro.

My photographer fares better. Collin played when Magic first appeared, but stopped roughly 10 years ago. Despite this playtime gap, he picks the game right up again, proving the rules are easy to understand and retain. He battles Patrick from Virginia, and after three rounds, Collin walks away with a 1–2 record.

We’re both eliminated from the draft, and it’s questionable how much we’ve learned about playing—I feel pretty much as in the dark as I did before. But I have solidified something about the game itself that I’d earlier dismissed as cheesy PR: They don’t call this game “Magic: The Gathering” for nothing. This really is a community.

“You make new friends, because whenever you go play, you’ve got to meet people,” says Alan Comer, the first Magic Hall of Famer. “It brings people together quite well.

“It is not, however, a good place to get a date,” he adds.

Comer recounts his visit to Boston. When he was riding the subway searching for stores where he could play Magic, someone recognized him as a pro-player and offered to take him to the shop...suddenly, Comer found friends wherever he went, not only because of his status as a pro within the Magic world, but also because the game inspires connection.

Renee Roub, Wizards of the Coast’s pro tour manager, attests to that concept. I ask her about World Championships and how the players, hailing from 60 nations worldwide, circumvent various language barriers to play. Without missing a beat, Roub’s answer is simple and elegant.

“They can speak Magic,” she tells me.

Even among the game’s best players, the sense of community can’t be broken. Two friends, Mike Jacob and Mark Herberholz, drove to the Nationals together from their native Michigan. Jacob bills himself a professional gamer, and Herberholz had won 2006’s Hawaii World Championship, taking home \$40,000 for his efforts. The two make place into the top eight on Sunday—and Jacob knocks Herberholz out of the running for the top spot. But while he’s crestfallen about losing, Herberholz doesn’t really mind getting beaten by his friend.

“The tournaments aren’t really about playing the card game, it’s just hanging out with all your friends and seeing everyone you’ve met from all over the world,” he explains. “It’s like planning a reunion four times a year.”

As it turns out, Jacob makes good use of his victory over Herberholz—he actually takes the whole damn thing, winning first place in the Nationals, the five grand, and a ticket to December’s World Championship in Memphis.

When I meet him post-victory, he’s showered with applause and cheers as we walk through the convention center. He rattles off an explanation of how he won by playing a card called “Skred.” “For every snow-covered-permanent you control, it deals one damage to a target creature, and costs one red as an instant,” he says—and it’s clear he’s a pro for a reason. And that I’m still a total moron when it comes to Magic.

It’s apparent how he knows so much about the games he plays; when not gaming professionally, Jacob works at the store he and Herberholz frequented in Michigan, Livonia’s R/W Hobbies. He too says that Magic’s greatest gift is reconnecting with friends made throughout years of playing.

“How many people can say they have friends all across the United States? If I go to San Francisco, I could call three people and have a place to stay,” he says. Even still, when asked if he’ll let Herberholz hold the trophy on the ride back home, he smiles and says, “No.” I guess when your buddy wins forty grand in Hawaii, you don’t feel too bad when you beat him at his own game.

But perhaps the best example of Magic joining people, of it being more than mere game, comes from Magic’s father himself, Richard Garfield. He recounts a story about commissioning a unique card’s creation, called “Proposal,” which asked for his fiancée’s hand in marriage. The catch, of course, was that he needed to draw the card and cast its spell for the proposal to happen.

“I played with her for hours before I was able to cast the spell,” he recalls. “She was just cleaning my clock—but eventually I managed to get it in play. It said ‘Allows Richard to propose marriage to Lily. If she accepts, both players win, and we mix our decks as a shared deck.’

Then he smiles.

“And I got a ‘Royal Assassin’ card out of it also.”