

EXPLORING THE SOCIAL WORLD OF
MAGIC: THE GATHERING

Jonathan Arlt

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Thesis Committee:

Larry Tifft, Ph.D.	Committee Chair
Katherine Rosier, Ph.D.	Faculty Member
Harry Mika, Ph.D.	Faculty Member
October 10, 2010	Date of Defense
Roger Coles, Ph.D.	Dean College of Graduate Studies
August 8, 2011	Approved by the College of Graduate Studies

This is dedicated to my best friend
Bob Hubbard.
Thanks for everything.

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING THE SOCIAL WORLD OF *MAGIC: THE GATHERING*

by Jonathan Arlt

This thesis is an exploration of the subculture surrounding the hobby game, *Magic: The Gathering*. The unique interaction necessitated by hobby games creates a different experience than similar genre-specific fan cultures. In spite of this, hobby game fan cultures have received little attention from academia. Within the context of hobby games, *Magic* is perhaps the most widespread and well-known, and as such is the logical starting point for an exploration of hobby game fan cultures.

The method used in this research was a series of in-depth interviews. Using participant-observation research methods, I immersed myself in the culture, making contact with members of the *Magic* subculture at a store dedicated to hobby gaming. After making contact and participating in games of *Magic* I interviewed 22 respondents, using ethnographic methods inspired by the symbolic-interactionist methods of the Chicago School. The interviews were designed to allow each respondent to discuss in their own words the effects *Magic* had had on their lives, and the elements of the game they most valued.

In general, this research indicates that participation in *Magic* has had a positive effect on the lives of gamers. Nearly every person interviewed discussed this gaming in social terms, both as a method for making new friends and as a way to reinforce existing friendships. The most striking finding was the extremely gendered nature of the game. All respondents interviewed, and indeed, all players observed during the research process, were male. The nature of the game and the ways in which it is taught suggest the likelihood that *Magic* is a method of alternative gender socialization, providing a different path to masculine identity for those involved.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND ARGUMENT

The Nerd as a Social Pariah

In popular media, the position of the “nerd” is that of social pariah. When William Shatner (best known for his recurring role as *Star Trek* front man Captain James Tiberius Kirk) guest-starred on Saturday Night Live and demanded that Trek fans “get a life”, he was echoing the general feeling of contempt that popular media has historically afforded the cult film lover, the comic book nerd, the computer geek, and the gamer (Jenkins, 2010: p.10). These pejorative labels all refer to a specific type of fan—one that isn’t just enamored with a TV show or movie, but instead identifies with these cultural products on a personal and social level.

In an age of disposable media produced for one-time consumption, there are those who view certain TV shows, video games, movies, comics or games as transcending mere entertainment. For many, these media represent more than temporary escapism, and are viewed as cultural texts. Moreover, these cultural texts speak to these people and their life experiences on a very serious level, in much the same way as more accepted cultural texts speak to the history and culture of our country. The notion of just what exactly cultural texts are seems to vary enormously, but one thing seems certain: texts seen as serving entertainment purposes are less important than “real” culture (Rauch, 2005).

If certain texts struggle with popular notions of cultural legitimacy, those people who engage these texts in very real and involved ways are often perceived with misunderstood contempt. However, in recent years, some fan cultures—or, more appropriately, the texts these cultures are based around—have become increasingly integrated and accepted into popular mainstream culture. A variety of pastimes once thought socially unacceptable or un-cool have found new media representation, often gaining mainstream following in the process. One need only look at Hollywood movies to see this change take place in the course of a decade or less. For example, in 1985’s *Weird Science*, two young

computer experts who are unable to get dates must resort to using their computer know-how to create the perfect woman. “Losers beyond compare and hopeless with girls, they come up with the idea – while staying over at Wyatt’s house while his parents are out of town – of creating the perfect woman on Wyatt’s computer (you can almost see their bug-eyed, leering faces in a bad *Playboy* cartoon, drooling over some centerfold on the monitor),” (Barsanti, 2003). The basis of the entire movie is that these two young men are so socially inept they are unable to interact in a normal way with young women their age, and so must use their skills with computers—the very signifier that they are socially inept—to create an artificial woman who can teach them how to “be cool”.

Ten years later, the movie *Hackers* portrays a very different view of computer experts. Suddenly, kids with computer know-how are shown as being hip and counter-culture, with handles like “Zero/Cool”, “Acid Burn”, “Serial Killer”, and “Crash Override”. One film critic notes the remarkable appearance of the protagonists, stating that “the seven core hooligans look . . . like they just stepped out of a Ridley Scott/Gianni Versace/Anna Sui fashion explosion,” (Savlov, 1995). *Hackers* goes out of its way to portray the main characters as sexy digital rebels, and computer experts are seen as members of an elite club, rather than the social pariahs presented in 1980s films like *Weird Science*. The movie was Angelina Jolie’s first starring role, portraying the hacker known as “Acid Burn”. The sexy, sultry lead female role is a far cry from the film’s 1980s counterparts, where the only women present were either unattainable love interests or the demented creations of pathetic losers.

The subculture of computer experts has not been the only one to experience a shift in perception. Indeed, the subjects of many fan cultures (if not the fans themselves) have become more mainstream, and this increase in social acceptance is nearly always represented in popular culture. Mainstream media such as successful movies and television shows have demonstrated that comic books, video games, and the science fiction/fantasy genres are all taken much more seriously now than they were in the past. Comic book movies, for example, have become Hollywood blockbusters, with the

Spider-Man franchise grossing over a billion dollars domestic and Christopher Nolan's *Batman* sequel *The Dark Knight* becoming the third-highest grossing domestic movie of all time (All Time Box Office Domestic Grosses, 2010).

The success of these comic book movies led to an explosion of films based on comics and graphic novels, with many more successful movies being made each year. Compare this to 1997's *Batman and Robin*, which was both a commercial and critical failure and reflected poorly on the comic book genre as a whole. Instead of representing the complex and gripping stories of the *Batman* comics, the movie degenerated into a series of awful one-liners and overdone special effects, with one critic stating that "when storytelling gets reduced to one big explosion after another, the effect is ultimately exhausting and unfulfilling" (Kipp, 1999).

Yet, the growth in popularity of these cultural texts is not always advantageous for members of the associated fan culture—and indeed, those considering themselves "true fans" are rarely as accepted as the texts that they revere. Even when a cultural text becomes widely accepted within mainstream American culture, there may be disadvantages to those who identify with it on more than a superficial level. Those heavily involved in the culture may feel as if it has been "taken away from them" as its mainstream appeal becomes more apparent. Such is the case for many comic book fans. The San Diego Comic-Con, the world's largest comic convention, has become dominated by major movie studios looking for free publicity for the next beloved character they aim to cash in on. There has been a groundswell of backlash and negative feelings from those considering themselves "true" fans that their culture has been invaded so abruptly, with the most commercially viable aspects of the convention being aired 24/7 on G4TV and MTV (Gustini, 2010).

The complaints at having one's own culture taken away seems rooted in the level of personal investment many people instill into certain cultural texts, a practice that occurs in many film fan cultures (Brooker, 2000: p.31). Members of fan cultures may use cultural texts to help define and interpret their

own lives. In Brooker's "Using the Force", one respondent describes the deep emotional importance the *Star Wars* films carry.

I was seven when *Star Wars* came out, and so grew up with the trilogy, and it probably saved my life. As a teen, my mother died young and unexpectedly of cancer, and my stepfather was abusive, and being an only child, *Star Wars* was my distraction, my escape, my addiction and my dreams, all wrapped up in one. As an adult, I have continued to be a fan, and it holds both the same appeal for me that it did when I was young, and an added meaning for all that it represents of the life I escaped when I immersed myself in that universe, reading and writing and playing in it. (2000: p.11)

Despite the personal meaning these texts can hold in the lives of fans, such devotion does not come without a price. Often, it seems that anyone who takes recreational texts "too seriously" is derided in the media, news and wider society. Those enjoying video games may be treated as childish and immature (Hymowitz, 2008), whereas those who truly invest in a culture—even going so far as to let it define multiple aspects of their lives—are almost always labeled as obsessive and bizarre, as shown on the popular "nerd" TV show *The Big Bang Theory* (Strauss, 2007). It seems clear that while certain cultural texts once considered nerdy may have become more socially acceptable, the subcultures surrounding them may not see similar acceptance. However, some fan cultures—particularly those perceived as dangerous or subversive—may not only be ignored by society, but indeed persecuted.

The "Danger" of Fan Cultures

The different levels of acceptance between cultural texts and the accompanying fan cultures are well represented by the subculture of video game fans. Video games have become an industry the size of Hollywood (Grossman, 2010), yet for the last fifteen years die-hard gamers have often been blamed for a number of horrific events in America. The video game industry (most often dominated by members of the culture it propagates) received much criticism during the 1990's as the tragic events of the Columbine school shootings were attributed to their violent influence (The Associated Press, 2001). Little was mentioned of the boys' other recreational activities, such as their avid love of bowling.

Video game fan culture has not remained silent in the face of these myriad accusations. Mike Krahulik and Jerry Holkins are the creators of *Penny Arcade*, one of the internet's most popular online video game webcomics. Outspoken proponents of video game culture, they were disgusted with gamers constantly being portrayed on the news as dangerous hooligans and set out to prove the pundits wrong. They created the "Child's Play" charity, the purpose of which was to provide games to sick kids in children's hospitals.

"Child's Play" became enormously successful and quickly outgrew its ideological roots, becoming less about "proving people wrong" and more about helping the kids. States Holkins, "historically, changing the minds of idiots has always been a challenging task," (Child's Play, Part 1: 2009). Significantly, the "Child's Play" organization is successful not simply because of its charitable efforts, but because it taps into a community that is not known for its civic participation. The charity has raised over seven million dollars for children's hospitals around the world since 2002 (About Child's Play, 2010). Yet, while Christmas time always brings some press to the doors of Penny Arcade, such actions receive far less news coverage than inflammatory accusations aimed at the video game industry and culture.

The Devil's Playground: Hobby Games and the Media

While the accusations of subversion and deviance were a shock to many video game fans, hobby game fans had long been accustomed to such treatment. During the late 70s and early 80s, during the heyday of the role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*, numerous accounts of the subversive and satanic nature of the game existed. The "satanic influence" of *Dungeons and Dragons* was protested by religious groups and concerned parents across the country, with the infamous Christian propagandist Jack Chick even producing a pamphlet detailing the subversive and dangerous nature of the game. As is often the case, the propaganda displayed a total lack of even the most basic understanding of the role-playing experience. Nevertheless, this didn't stop Jack Chick from filling in the

blanks himself, combining the pen-and-paper fantasy experience with foul murder and subversive cults (D&D Kills with the Help of Satan!, 2008).

The “subversive” nature of this perpetually misunderstood game is one that has been exploited multiple times. In one particularly tragic episode, the suicide of a 16-year old college student in the late 1970’s, was falsely attributed to his involvement in *Dungeons and Dragons*. Before the truth came out, the sad tale had been milked for all it was worth, being looted and turned into a novel loosely based on the misinformation provided by a private detective investigating the boy’s death (Kushner, 2008). This in turn led to a movie starring a young Tom Hanks titled *Mazes and Monsters*, a less-than-clever play on words that highlights the level of creativity the movie displays and unsuccessfully tries to ape the most basic concepts behind *Dungeons and Dragons* (La Farge, 2006).

In the film, Hanks’ character and his friends—all hopeless social rejects and all mentally ill in some fashion—bumble around college obsessing about fantasy characters and engaging in the occasional suicide. By the end of the movie one character is dead and Tom Hanks has totally lost his grip on reality, believing that he is his “character” in the game and interpreting the real world to match his full-blown psychotic break from reality. In spite of its horrendous production, false pretense, and tragically exploitative qualities, the movie did not do a complete disservice to the reality of role-playing games. In the film, as often occurs in real life, no one ever thought to ask *why* these young men and women sought to lose themselves in a fantasy where they could pretend they were someone else. And in the film, as in real life, we can wonder what would have happened differently had their friends and family been paying attention to their obvious feelings of loneliness, desperation and alienation.

In recent years, the fervor surrounding the “danger” of hobby games has lessened, though not vanished entirely. Yet, while hobby games remain ignored or viewed with faint suspicion, other once-deviant subcultures have seen increased levels of social acceptance. This is often displayed both in the media and academia. It seems that as the visibility of the cultural texts that fan cultures are based on

increase and popular perception changes, the amount of social scientific research (and perhaps the type of social science research) done on these cultures changes. At the same time, academic research increases visibility and understanding of cultural texts, and as such may help adjust societal notions of these texts and the subcultures surrounding them.

This may be the case with research on internet culture and online gaming. While it can be argued that much of the recent increase in articles is due to the growing importance of the internet in our society, it seems clear that we are well past the point where computers and video games have been the “new thing”, and the surge in such academic articles has other roots. This seems to coincide with the increasing legitimation not just of video games but even of video game culture. In spite of their creation of the “Child’s Play” charity, Krahulik and Holkins have often been surrounded by controversy. This is partially due to their outspoken (and often vulgar) nature, as well as a growing perception that they are the “face” of video game fandom. Yet in 2010 they were placed on the “Time Top 100 Most Influential People” list (Grossman, 2010), signaling a shift in perception of those involved not in the creation of video games but in the culture surrounding video games. Within 15 years, the perception of video gamers has changed enormously, and the question begs to be asked: What has prompted this, and the changes in perception of similarly persecuted fan cultures?

Visibility, Understanding and Marketability of Cultural Texts

Hobby gaming (and hobby game fan culture) has long stood as a scapegoat for the subversion of American youth. It has not been alone in this, and there exists a long list of cultural texts that have supposedly posed threats to the physical and spiritual well-being of teenagers. These dread influences have included video games, violent movies, gangster rap, and rock and roll. Yet, the perception of these texts and their accompanying subcultures have shifted over time. Some have become so integrated into mainstream society it is hard to believe that they were ever controversial; CMU itself has a History of

Rock and Roll class, and the (often hyperviolent) works of the Coen brothers and Quentin Tarantino are frequent subject matter at the graduate level in film study classes.

Why does hobby gaming stand apart from other texts and fan cultures in this regard? It is a “nerdy” subculture, like comic book subculture or computer subculture, but has not received the mainstream success other texts enjoy. It has also been seen as a subversive and dangerous influence, in much the same way as rock music or violent movies have been accused of corrupting our youth. Yet, the perceptions of these texts has changed much in the last thirty years, gaining increased cultural and academic legitimacy—unlike hobby gaming, which (at best) can hope to be quietly ignored.

When looking at the ways in which acceptance of cultural texts shift over time, a pattern seems to emerge. Those texts that have become socially accepted have gone through certain changes. These changes can be best understood as a combination of three factors: cultural visibility, cultural understanding, and the profitability or marketability of the text. It seems that in many cases, when the level of understanding, visibility, and perceived profitability (or marketability) of a text increases, the text is more likely to become embraced and accepted by the wider culture.

I believe these changes are all linked, but begin with issues of cultural visibility. This visibility often occurs prior to widespread cultural understanding of the text. In some cases, as with video games or rock music, the lack of understanding contributes to a cultural backlash against the text and the accompanying fan cultures. “Nerdy” fan cultures experience similar misunderstanding, but tend to be labeled as harmless losers rather than violent sociopaths. As visibility increases for a cultural text, other changes may be prompted. Not uncommonly, media companies will attempt to “cash in” on the newly visible text.

Often, the most marketable and popular aspects of the text will be distilled and repackaged, available for consumption by a wider audience. A good example of this was the rebooting of the *Star Trek* film franchise in 2009, deliberately marketed as being a “different” or “new” *Star Trek*. Many

critics and fans felt this did not come without a steep cost, and Roger Ebert stated that “the Gene Roddenberry years, when stories might play with questions of science, ideals or philosophy, have been replaced by stories reduced to loud and colorful action. Like so many franchises, it’s more concerned with repeating a successful formula than going boldly where no “Star Trek” has gone before.” (2009)

As this happens, we see that many of the unique elements of the text may become marginalized, and members of the fan community may feel as though the text has been “stolen” from them. Perhaps this is why the most widely known cultural texts of a particular genre are also the most easily disseminated, simplified, and mass produced. Yet, hobby gaming culture has resisted all attempts at a wider level of understanding, acceptance, or exposure, and such attempts at making these elements known more widely have failed horribly.

There are a number of possible reasons for this. Hobby gaming takes place in people’s homes, at hobby stores, or at special events not marketed to the general public. As such, the level of visibility for these games and those that play them remains low. The understanding for involvement in this culture is perhaps the most challenging aspect as the complicated nature of the games and the intricate social worlds created by them are mysterious and strange to outsiders. Finally, the level of marketability for these games remains low—after all, we have seen that one needs to distill most ideas down to their basic elements for widespread marketing to be successful, and this is largely difficult with hobby games. Any attempt to “legitimize” tournament level *Magic* by showing it on ESPN 2 was met with confusion from sports fans and derision from hobby fans. Worse still was the ill-fated cinematic release *Dungeons and Dragons*, a movie that appealed to neither fans of the game nor wider audiences.

Nevertheless, the increased level of visibility for texts such as video games, rock music, and comic book movies has led to a wider understanding of the most basic elements of these texts, if not always the fan cultures that follow them. It seems as if most texts become accepted by widespread American culture only after becoming visible and widely understood, and historically, this has most

often occurred when an organization deems this process profitable. As a result, it seems perfectly normal that as the wider ideas of these texts are known in the culture, academic research on the texts increases, thus furthering understanding and visibility, and as the nature of rock music, video games, and comic books became more widely understood, the level and direction of academic research focused towards these texts and their fan cultures has changed.

Explanation of Argument

This thesis is an exploration of a fan culture that has received little in the way of positive cultural exposure, hobby gaming fan culture. Being a fan of various hobby games, I decided to explore the role that hobby games and hobby game fan cultures have played in the lives of other gamers. I would do this by exploring the subculture surrounding one of the most widely played and known hobby games, called *Magic: The Gathering*. In doing so, I hoped to gain greater understanding of the role that this particular type of fan culture may play in people's lives, and perhaps even contribute in some small way to the increasing social visibility of these games and fan cultures.

There exists little academic research on hobby game fan cultures, leaving many questions as to their nature unanswered. Brooker (2002), Fine (1983), and others have all demonstrated the potential value of fan culture in the lives of those who participate. Yet, unlike many fan cultures, the texts hobby game fandom are based around have low levels of cultural acceptance, understanding and visibility—and when these cultures are visible in wider society, they are often presented as dangerous and subversive. How does involvement in hobby game fan culture differ from other, similar fan cultures? How do adherents of hobby game fan cultures perceive themselves and the games they play, and are these perceptions influenced by wider cultural perceptions of hobby games? Finally, what role—if any—do the games themselves play in the life of the gamer?

Focus of the Research

The multitude of gaming fan cultures, as well as the blending of members between similar groups, made analyzing a single gaming subculture a logistical impossibility. More often than not, the lines between these subcultures are blurred with those of friend groups and other fan cultures, presenting few easily identifiable, separate fan cultures. Furthermore, the inherent complexities of the social structures surrounding these games present a difficult challenge to researchers. By examining these cultures at a microsocial level—for instance, by conducting a study of one particular friend group based around gaming—a researcher would be ignoring the larger context of gaming culture. Conversely, by attempting to study an entire subculture based around one game, or even hobby games in general, a researcher might create false distinctions, miss important individual elements between hobby game genres, and may create artificial and perhaps spurious generalizations.

In order to avoid these pitfalls, I set out, not to quantify any one aspect of hobby game subculture, but rather, to explore the role one particular game (and, by association, the fan culture surrounding that game) had on the lives of one diverse group of hobby gamers. I decided to frame this exploration as a qualitative study of approximately 25 hobby gamers, identified by their participation in one particularly well-known and widely played hobby game, the collectable card game known as *Magic: The Gathering*. I intended the study to be completed through a series of casual, informal interviews performed at a local card shop, where players would come and participate in official, sanctioned tournaments.

These interviews were designed to allow participants to discuss, in their own terms, the influence and impact of hobby gaming (and the fan culture of hobby gaming) in their lives (Appendix D). By doing so, I hoped to get a feel for how the game had affected those interviewed without asking leading questions. I hoped that the relative ease of entry for *Magic*, as well as its widespread visibility within the larger framework of hobby game subcultures, would present a decent representation of

hobby gaming culture, while at the same time being a specific enough focus that the amount of information gathered would not be overwhelming.

Due to a lack of academic work on hobby game fan culture, much of my background research was rooted in my own personal and extensive experience with *Magic* fan culture. Furthermore, it has been necessary for me to study the parallel literature of so-called “cult” fan culture, such as role-playing games and film fandom. I will demonstrate (primarily in my literature review) that sci-fi television and film fan cultures are similar enough to the related fan culture of hobby gaming that this comparison is insightful. Through this parallel literature review, I was able to learn about the social structure of similar fan cultures, as well as discover some common ways in which academic research portrays fan culture. These works also helped identify how fans of various cultures use cultural texts to ease social interaction and foster a positive sense of personal identity.

CHAPTER II

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

Personal Goals

My expectations for this project were framed by my own experiences with hobby games, and due to the highly personal nature of this subject matter, it is necessary to briefly discuss my own history with hobby game fandom. My personal experience with hobby game fan culture has been far different than the subversive nature espoused by TV shows and alarmed pundits. Throughout my life, I have found that the influence and impact of hobby games—and more importantly, the fan cultures surrounding the hobby games—have been incredibly positive. No game represented this better than *Magic*, which provided my introduction to hobby fandom.

I had always unthinkingly assumed that most fellow hobby gamers felt the same way I did about hobby gaming. Yet, my assumption was exactly that—a “best guess”, based on my positive personal experience and the positive experiences of my friends. Early research on the culture of hobby gaming turned up little. It turns out that academic works on hobby game fan culture are almost non-existent, and those that do exist primarily deal with elements of social bonding and shared fantasy without addressing the wider implications of positive social bridging effects. In Fine’s study of role-playing culture, he details the experience of early role-playing groups and the social nature of gaming culture (1983). However, that culture has changed enormously in the almost 30 years since his work, and *Magic* was not created until almost a decade after his study.

Playing hobby games helped me develop the social skills that I might otherwise never have learned. They helped me to develop a strong sense of self and form a positive self-identity, and to this day continue to provide a way to meet new friends. In this thesis, I ask questions as to the role of *Magic* and *Magic* fan cultures in the lives of participants, and explore the idea that a simple hobby game can provide important social bonds, facilitate social interaction, and help people create or construct a

positive self-image. Yet I was well aware that this may not be the case for many, or indeed most, other hobby gamers. The low level of cultural visibility and understanding may affect the way that hobby gamers view themselves and their pastimes. By interviewing other hobby gamers, I hoped to gain insight and perhaps answer some of these questions.

Personal Positive Experience with Hobby Games

My experiences with hobby games have been almost entirely positive, and it will come as no surprise that the games played (and still play) an important role in my social life. I moved to America from England when I was 11, and due to my thick British accent I was immediately perceived as different from other children. This, coupled with the strong sense of displacement that I felt at such an abrupt change in place, made it very difficult to make friends. Often I found I had nothing in common with the other children, and quickly became a social outcast. That all changed in 7th grade during the fall of 1994. Two of my friends had an older brother that was a hobby gamer and together they taught me a game he had learned earlier in the year. The game was called *Magic: The Gathering* (or *Magic* for short), the first collectable card game ever created. I quickly bought as many cards as I could with my small allowance. With my existing status as a social outcast, I wasn't worried about the possible social ramifications of such a "nerdy" pastime. I simply found as many other loners as possible and introduced them to the game.

Without even realizing it, I had already begun to use hobby games as a facilitator for social interaction. Furthermore, I began to use the game to develop a sense of social identity. *Magic* provided a way for me to meet friends, a safe and acceptable way to navigate social interaction, and a sense of self-value and self-worth. My fellow outcasts quickly developed a shared enthusiasm, not just for the game of *Magic*, but also for the interpersonal connections that it provided. Of course, at the time we

didn't know the significance of the game that brought us together—we saw it simply as a fun game to play with our new friends.

Magic was more than just a game to us, it became the focus of our friendships and the basis on which an ever-expanding social group was slowly pieced together. Suddenly, we weren't alone anymore. We might have been small in stature or strange in self-presentation, and we might have had to endure the indignity of social and physical bullying, but with a group of peers who shared our interests such issues suddenly seemed less important. As we grew, the game grew with us, and we began to expand our interests into other hobby games. Gradually, our social group evolved from being based simply around playing *Magic* in the school lunch room into a wide social network linked by a shared interest in a wide genre of games, fantasy novels, sci-fi movies, and comic books. It wasn't until years later that we realized the full significance of our early *Magic* playing days, and how the game had aided in creating an entire social network of peers with similar hobbies.

I was often faced with censure from other students and picked on a lot during my young adolescence. Ostensibly this was due to my involvement in nerdy activities, but I had experienced the indignity of bullying for most of my childhood and knew that playing *Magic* was just another excuse to get picked on. If anything, the game helped with the bullying, and as a group of young, self-proclaimed nerds, we developed a strong group identity that lasted for years in the face of constant adversity. Well into my adulthood I still maintain regular contact with most of the members of this group.

Junior high bullies weren't the only ones who disapproved of my gaming. I was heavily involved in the Lutheran Church and my church youth group was the most frequent "official" extracurricular activity I participated in. There, I was constantly warned of the dangers of gaming, both the well-known and horrifying satanic risks involved during *Dungeons and Dragons* and the newer, more insidious dangers represented through *Magic*. Many of the religious authority figures in my life either discouraged or tried to prevent me from my continued involvement with these games, and banned

them from all church and youth group functions. Sadly, these authority figures did not regard social bullying or ostracizing with the same disdain that they saved for presumed occult activities. For most of my involvement in youth group I was made to feel like an outsider. I was never sure why this was, but I knew that the friends I made playing *Magic* were never aloof, never treated me with disdain, and never excluded me from social functions. Needless to say, I continued to play these games despite the potential risk they posed my immortal soul.

Hobby games continued to play an important role in my life as I got older. Through *Dungeons and Dragons*, I found a group of casual acquaintances into friendships that have lasted years. A chance game of *Magic* cards in my dorm commons room with a group of freshmen I'd never met became the basis for a whole new social group that still exists nine years later. While I'm perfectly capable of making friends who have no interest in hobby games whatsoever, the closest friendship bonds of my life have almost always come from gaming.

During my sixteen years of hobby gaming, I have met hundreds of gamers and made countless acquaintances, rivals, and friends, and while we all have different life experiences, I've found that many gamers have similar stories to those my friends and I share. Instead of having an alienating influence, hobby game fan culture has been an inclusive experience, allowing me to make friends, bridge gaps, and bond with existing friends. Instead of making me feel like a loner and a weirdo, hobby game fan culture helped me to create a positive self-identity. And instead of being something I was ashamed of, hobby game fan culture helped me develop a much-needed sense of self-confidence during the difficult early years of adolescence.

Personal and Social Aspects of Hobby Gaming

With this thesis research, I set out to see what other gamers thought about hobby fandom. I wanted to know if other hobby gamers had experiences similar to mine, and how many of them were

out there. I also wanted to know if their experiences differed in significant ways, how the role of *Magic* in their lives was different, and if hobby game fandom differed in any significant ways from other, similar fan cultures. I see hobby games as being potentially more than simple pastimes, and I believe that they can play an important role in people's lives. I have experienced this in my own life in two very important ways. Through *Magic*, I was able to create a new self, and the game had a tremendous impact on my sense of self-identity. After moving to America from England, I felt lost and didn't know who I was; *Magic* provided me with an important method of self-identification. I didn't just play *Magic*, I was a *Magic* player.

For me, the effects on self-identity through hobby gaming have been profound. Due to differences in curriculum between countries, I struggled in school during those early years, and my naturally small stature and aversion towards physical contact made me a poor participant in sports. *Magic* provided me with an activity that wasn't only fun, but one that I could excel at. It gave me further confidence by helping me believe that the "trivial" knowledge I cared about mattered. Within the context of hobby game fan culture, my love and knowledge of fantasy and science fiction became a mark of respect instead of a shameful, secret obsession. Having a tangible talent also provided me with a great deal of self-confidence. I quickly found I was a creative and talented deck builder as well as a decent player, and developed a positive reputation among other *Magic* players for my unusual and interesting decks.

As important as these effects were, the most significantly positive impact on my sense of self-identity came from the second role that *Magic* played in my life. Having a game like *Magic* eased and facilitated social interaction between me and other children, something I had struggled with a great deal. By becoming a part of *Magic* culture, I was able to meet new people and have something in common with them—a seemingly simple act that was invaluable to a small kid with a funny accent. *Magic* gave me the confidence to meet new friends and come out of my shell, and before long I was

approaching the other lonely kids in the lunchroom and teaching them how to play. Most importantly, the game facilitated the development of a tight-knit group of friends. Over the years our friend group changed, grew, and began to encompass other activities, but one thing remained constant—the more we played together the closer we became.

Throughout this research (and especially in Chapter VI: Findings), I refer to the “personal aspects” and “social aspects” of the game. When I do so and do not elaborate, I am referring to the experiences detailed here. The personal aspects or elements of the game refer to experiences similar to mine—the role *Magic* played in the development of positive self-identity and an increase in self-confidence. The social aspects or elements of the game also refer to *Magic’s* positive impact on my social life and its role in helping me develop the ability to interact with others. Due to the lack of research on hobby gaming, a fundamental part of this thesis project has been using my own life experiences as a starting point for the exploration of the wider culture. As a result, it seems only fitting that when those experiences are similar, I use the examples from my life detailed here to provide a reference point. When those personal and social aspects differ from the experiences I had, I refer to the impact the game has had on the lives of those I interviewed in a direct and detailed fashion.

CHAPTER III

DISCUSSION AND EXPLANATION OF HOBBY GAMES

Hobby Gaming and Fan Culture

In order to explore a fan culture, it is first necessary to gain a basic understanding of the cultural text around which a particular group arises. This is especially true with gaming culture as it is incredibly complex, has received little visibility in the media or academia, and requires high levels of interaction between participants. Indeed, the games and their accompanying fan cultures are so closely related that they are almost interchangeable, and often when people are talking about “the game”, they are actually referencing the related fan culture.

Gaming cultures arise around certain types of tabletop hobby games. Hobby gaming culture is really a number of smaller fan cultures loosely linked through various friend groups, genres, and shared activities. These variant forms of fan cultures often share similarities in purpose, structure, and social demographics to other “nerdy” fan cultures, such as TV, film, or comic book groups. However, they differ in some significant ways, and this difference is most often provided by the games themselves. By their very nature, these games not only provide a form of interaction that may facilitate the creation of friendship but may be able to create social groups by simply existing. For some, this may provide a bond that is even stronger than that found in other shared-interest groups, such as film fan culture.

I believe the key to this bond is the interaction provided by hobby games. For example, if two die-hard *Star Trek* fans meet, they immediately have something in common. However, their social interactivity is limited (at least initially) to either talking about the subject of their fandom or group viewing practices. Brooker cites many examples of this, discussing the importance of group viewing practices in “Using the Force” (2002).

[Through group viewing, fans] are doing far more than passing time with a trashy text as ironic entertainment like the *Batman* and *Dynasty* audience, far more even than the *Dallas* and *Neighbors* viewers who use the shows as a means of exploring issues in their own everyday

lives; they are touching base with something familiar and precious to them, and by doing it together they are cementing their own friendships (2002: p.31).

Yet, these interactions—while often important and unifying for members of the fan culture—tend to be passive in nature. Conversely, when two *Magic* players meet, they don't just have something to talk about, they also have a social activity they can perform together.

I believe that this seemingly unassuming interaction extends far beyond a simple leisure activity and actually facilitates deep social connectivity, resulting in a bond that is as significant as any other fan culture, but may be able to occur much faster. As a result of this difference, it becomes clear that in order to properly understand the fan culture surrounding *Magic* it is necessary to explain what hobby games are in general terms, a brief history of hobby games, how *Magic* fits into the greater genre of hobby games, and a very basic explanation of how *Magic* is played. In doing so, we can understand the interaction *Magic* requires and facilitates and gain unique insight into the role it may play in people's lives. For the sake of brevity, the descriptions of *Magic* and other hobby games are short and tend towards general overview. I have included more detailed descriptions in my appendices (Appendices A, B and C).

What's a Hobby Game?

It should be noted that the term "hobby game" is somewhat nebulous, and there is currently no widely accepted term for what exactly qualifies. Often, the very nature of two games classified as such differs tremendously, and at first glance would seem to share little in common with each other. In order to both prevent confusion and to illustrate some of the important aspects of hobby gaming, I define here what I consider to be a hobby game, what I do not, and why.

For the purposes of this thesis research, the term "hobby games" refers to a broad genre of games united not by their shared goals or rules but by similar types of social interaction. The objects of the games vary according to three major sub-genres existing within the overall genre of hobby gaming,

and range from non-competitive storytelling games focused on the achievement of shared goals, to competitive games similar (in a distant way) to a multiplayer game of poker or chess. Notably, while requiring high degrees of imagination and interpersonal interaction, these games always contain physical elements, ranging from rulebooks, dice, and pen and paper to massive “armies” of miniature plastic warriors.

All these are elements of numerous games or hobbies existing throughout human history, but hobby games are differentiated from these “traditional” activities in important ways. To truly qualify as a hobby game, a particular game must contain three key elements in addition to those mentioned already: 1) a flexible base of rules able to be changed by the player or the producer of the game; 2) the ability for a player to invest himself personally and creatively in one or more aspects of the game; and 3) the ability for players to enter into shared fantasy with each other during gameplay. These various aspects may not be utilized by each individual player during each game, but for a game to truly be a hobby game the option to do so must exist. With these definitions in mind, it becomes easier to see what does and does not qualify as a hobby game.

The Three Key Elements of Hobby Games

For the purposes of this thesis, a hobby game needs some combination of three elements: flexible rules, creative personalization, and shared fantasy. Each element is accorded varying importance for each individual game, meaning that no two hobby games are ever the same. The nature and emphasis of these elements within a given game (as well as the game’s overall purpose or goal) can vary enormously, and usually informs which subgenre they fall into. However, it must be understood that each person and group playing the game defines for themselves the overall importance of each element within the game. Second to the interaction the games provide, I believe the level of personalization each game provides is the most important aspect of hobby games.

More than anything, it is this flexibility and the ability to “own” a game that marks hobby games as different not only from other games, but from other cultural texts. Notably, each of these three elements relies on the others to exist within the framework of the game, as well as both requiring and enhancing high levels of personal interaction between those playing. Within the genre of hobby games, collectable games (and *Magic* in particular) demand the least amount of shared fantasy or personal creative investment to play the game or be involved in the culture. It should be noted, however, that while one does not have to participate in these aspects, the ability to do so exists, and it is the ability to do so, not the requirement to do so, that defines a hobby game. Appendix A provides a detailed explanation of the three key elements of hobby games, as well as how they interrelate and their effect on the three main subgenres of hobby games.

Summary Definition of Hobby Games

I define hobby games as a broad genre containing numerous (and sometimes seemingly disparate) game systems and styles of play. A hobby game facilitates (and indeed requires) some level of social-physical interaction, utilizing physical elements that are produced by companies making the games (or in some rare cases by the fans themselves). Hobby games tend to focus more on face-to-face interaction and joint creativity than electronic interaction or physical activity. Finally, each hobby game contains three key elements: a flexible rules base, the ability for players to invest themselves personally and creatively into the game, and the ability to use the game to facilitate shared fantasy.

For the purposes of this research, I further narrow the definition of hobby games as a form of non-electronic interaction, containing an emphasis on social and creative interaction over physical-social interaction. I do not include electronic games, regardless of the level of interaction they provide. There are some games that truly blur the boundaries between video and hobby games, but these are few and far between and are excluded due to their rarity within the overall culture. What I am interested in is

face-to-face social and creative interaction, as I believe this is the best determiner of exactly what a hobby game is. As a result I also exclude sports or games with an emphasis on physical activity from my definition. This includes the many types of live action role-playing games. While sharing the lineage (and often the fanbase) of various hobby games, the purpose and execution of these games differs in a number of important ways to those of hobby fan culture, and are outside the scope of this project. Appendix A provides a more detailed description of games similar in structure to hobby games but not meeting the criteria listed here.

Within the wide genre of hobby games, I believe there are three broad subgenres that cover the majority of games. These are: 1) role-playing games (or RPGs), which have a focus on storytelling, small-group social interaction, non-competitive goal-oriented play, and shared fantasy; 2) tabletop strategy games, which are closely related to miniature wargames and tend to focus on structured play, acquisition and collection of miniature models, and a heavy emphasis on personal creativity (both through physically building and painting game pieces); and 3) collectable games, which tend to emphasize ease of play (both in terms of initial rules and in terms of space and time required), collectable game pieces connected to a strong secondary market, and rapid social interaction. Each game emphasizes some of the three hobby gaming elements more than others, and as such, it is important to explore these vital components of the hobby game experience. However, this is difficult without first understanding the origin of hobby games, and the role each game plays in the wider culture.

History of Hobby Games

While the individual games may often differ a great deal, hobby games nevertheless fall into one large, broad genre of games. The history of each game—and indeed, each of the three main genres—is

related to the others, and as such a brief understanding of their history is necessary. Hobby games originated in the mid-1970s, and were developed from traditional wargames (Fine, 1983: p.8). One group of gamers' increasing emphasis on fantasy elements within their historic wargames eventually led them to develop variations of their games where mythical heroes took center stage. In time, these fictional heroes (often inspired by Western mythology or fantasy works such as Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings") became the focus of the whole game, and the competitive, physical-map based game was dropped for a game with an emphasis on co-operative, imaginative play. Effectively, role-playing developed out of wargaming into a game based around structured, verbal improvisational acting, set within the framework of an imaginary world controlled by one player (the Game Master, or GM), defined by the shared fantasy experience, and unified by a set of rules for how to interact within the shared fantasy.

Dungeons and Dragons, the first role-playing game, was also the first modern hobby game (Fine, 1983: p.9). It was not long before players took the unique elements of *Dungeons and Dragons* (such as flexible rules, personal creativity, and shared fantasy), and re-applied them to the wargames they had been born from. In doing so, wargaming evolved into the sub-genre of tabletop strategy games. Containing some of the basic elements of wargames (being played on a large space, the representation of armies by miniatures, and a focus on dice rolling to determine random events), tabletop strategy games de-emphasized the shared fantasy inherent in role-playing games and incorporated the elements of creativity and personal investment most strongly. In the most well-known games such as *Warhammer* and *Warhammer 40k*, creativity and personal investment are as important as one's skill in playing the game, even at official tournaments (Fine, 1983: p.10).

Throughout the 1980s, both role-playing games and tabletop strategy games grew in popularity. However, the games were not without disadvantages; *Dungeons and Dragons* could require a lot of personal and emotional investment, as well as requiring a great deal of time, privacy and space to play.

The genre of tabletop strategy games, while easier to pick up and play than role-playing games (and requiring less people to play), nevertheless had its own disadvantages. The space needed was even greater than role-playing games, and the difficulty of transporting the massive amount of models needed for the game affected frequency of public play. As a result, there was often a great deal of downtime at large gaming conventions, with players between rounds or games having little to do. The onset of collectable gaming would change that forever.

In 1993, *Magic: The Gathering* was introduced to the gaming world by Seattle-based gaming company, Wizards of the Coast. *Magic* traded a lower degree of personal creativity, investment, and shared fantasy for a rules system that prompted rapid social interaction, required little in the way of play space, could be played easily either with two people or a group, and could often be completed in a brief period of time. Countless other collectable card and figure games followed, and *Magic* has since become one of the most wide-spread of all hobby game genres (What is *Magic: The Gathering*? 2010). As a result of its widespread influence, ease of play, and the variety of ways it has affected the hobby gaming world, *Magic* holds a unique position in the world of hobby gaming, and as such is an appropriate focus when studying hobby game subcultures. Appendix B provides a more detailed description of the history of hobby games; Appendix C provides a more detailed explanation of each specific genre of hobby games, including examples of gameplay.

Playing *Magic*

Two of the main barriers to wider cultural acceptance of hobby gaming are its low visibility and the lack of understanding surrounding the text. It's easy enough to "understand" film fan culture, even if one labels them as deviant for becoming "too involved". However, the complex and unique nature of hobby games means that the uninitiated often have little to no understanding of anything about even the most basic aspects of the game. The interactive nature of hobby games is inevitably tied to the

social interaction it provides. As a result, I believe that if one does not have at least a vague conception of the game and how it is played, one cannot truly understand the fan culture based on that game. To this end, I have attempted to include a concise and simplified description of the gameplay and basic rules for *Magic*.

A game of *Magic* begins with each player shuffling their deck, giving the opponent the opportunity to shuffle or cut each other's deck, and determining randomly who goes first. *Magic* decks must have a minimum of 60 cards per player deck. Furthermore, there can be no more than four of a specific card in any deck (except for basic lands, the game's resources). Each player draws seven cards from their own deck as a starting hand, and begins play with 20 "life points". The game most often ends when one player reduces the other to zero life (although less common alternative ways of winning exist). Each player takes turns, with each turn divided into "phases" dictating when certain actions can happen or certain cards can be played.

Much of *Magic* revolves around resource management, and in order to use cards (or "play spells"), one must utilize the resource of "lands". Lands typically make up about one-third of most decks, meaning that any given starting hand of seven cards will usually contain between two and four lands. Almost all cards cost mana except lands, which are free to play and generate mana; a player must decide when and how to use his mana in a turn, and the effective use of resources is often the key to success. Cards are typically divided between temporary spells, representing one-time effects, and permanent spells, such as summoned creatures, enchantments or powerful artifacts. Appendix C provides a more detailed account of how *Magic* is played.

Elements of randomness are involved in the game—each turn a player draws a card from the top of his deck at the beginning of each turn, representing his increased access to spells and resources, and one never knows what will come up next. Additionally, a player doesn't know what their opponent has in their hand. While these random elements make up an important part of the game, *Magic* is far

more than simple odds. It can be likened in many ways to a combination of chess and poker; one must not only contend with the existing pieces on the battlefield and the strategy that revolve around them, but the unseen cards in the opponent's hand and the myriad possibilities in their deck. Thus, a defining aspect of *Magic* involves risk/reward decision making.

Should one rely too much on odds, treating the game like a math problem, it becomes easy to bluff the opponent. If, for example, the opponent only makes certain plays when they are mathematically likely to work, the assumption is often that the opposing player will also do that. Being a lifelong *Magic* bluffer, I can say this often isn't the case, and I have won more than a few games by making risky moves that weren't statistically sound. At the same time, one needs to be aware of chance and probability within the game. Ignoring this can lead to paralyzing indecision or random gambits, both of which can be taken advantage of just as easily as a reliance on probability.

Perhaps more than any other element, the extent to which a person or playgroup imbues a game with their own personal creativity varies on an individual basis. However, this element is always there in some form, and is a vital aspect of hobby games. Typically, a game between two players lasts anywhere from 5 to 20 minutes, although this can vary enormously, especially considering the style of play. Official tournament games tend to be the fastest, and during most tournaments, a "round" consists of the best out of three games played within a 45-minute time frame. The games are almost always played to completion in this timeframe, with the best out of three winning the round. The fact that each game of *Magic* is different means there is inevitably some amount of "downtime" between rounds, and players who are done with their game frequently spend this time socializing. This downtime proved to be an important part of this research, allowing me to socially connect with players and engage them during the process of interaction provided by *Magic*.

Casual and Competitive Play

One of the most enduring and appealing aspects of *Magic* is its wide variation in gameplay, allowing for a number of “play styles”. Most gamers I’ve known seem to have started the game as a “casual” player, playing games with existing friends and using whatever cards were in a player’s collection. Often, the game is taught in multiplayer format, highlighting one of the greatest advantages of *Magic*—while it is marketed primarily as a two-player game, any number of people can participate. In my experience, multiplayer games typically consist of 3-5 players, but this varies between friend groups. These games present numerous advantages for a new player. The games aren’t “official”, meaning there is plenty of room for trial and error as the new player learns the game. Furthermore, the new player is able to learn from multiple players at once, as the level of competition in many multiplayer games is eased in favor of social interaction.

Multiplayer games also have a tremendously different dynamic than single player games, as the number of threats on the battlefield increases exponentially for each player present. This means that game play tends to proceed at a more measured pace, which allows the new player time to learn and understand not just the rules but also the dynamics of the game. Finally, there are no limitations on which cards can be used (with the exception of home-made agreements between groups of players). This means that new players are often given older, out of print cards to learn and practice with, defraying the initial startup cost of the game. Of course, multiplayer *Magic* is not limited to beginners. The group of veteran *Magic* players to which I belong has tried just about every format and version of the game imaginable, but nowadays mostly plays a multiplayer format that focuses more on creative and original deck building than the technical and strictly skill-oriented aspects of gameplay.

The main format for playing *Magic* (and the format most likely to be supported by “official” tournaments and events) is limited to play between two people (What is *Magic: The Gathering?* 2010). Most often known as “standard”, this format has the most emphasis on rules and the purchasing of product. A player can only use cards released within the last two years, and each fall as a major set is

released, the old set and its accompanying subsets are rotated out. This has two main effects on the game. The constantly changing nature of *Magic* ensures both that players continue to buy the product and support Wizards of the Coast, and that gameplay never stagnates.

Official standard tournaments take a number of forms. Some coincide with the release of new product, and are limited to the use of those cards. These often form a sub-set of standard play called “limited”, or drafting. In drafting, a player uses only the cards he picks from the product he has available; the idea is that this form of *Magic* displays not just the player’s technical prowess but also his deck building prowess and ability to work with limited resources. The main form of tournament *Magic*, however, is simply standard play. Hobby stores around the world host weekly events called “Friday Night *Magic*”, or FNM for short. These weekly events are supported by Wizards of the Coast, with prize support (most often in the form of packs of cards) being available for those who place highest in the tournament. Almost all my interviews were conducted during Tuesday night drafts at the local hobby store or “Friday Night *Magic*” tournaments, with one occurring at the release party for a new set.

The Significance of Hobby Game Subcultures

By arriving at a detailed explanation of hobby gaming—both by understanding what defines a hobby game and the history of hobby games themselves—we are able to identify on some level with the participants of these unique subcultures. While the visibility of these cultural texts remains low, one can nevertheless begin to understand both the games and their accompanying fan cultures by understanding the cultural and historic context that they exist within. By further comprehending both the background and the basic rules of a particular hobby game (in this case *Magic*), we can narrow our focus appropriately, and begin to recognize the interaction a single game provides, if still being unaware of the significance of that interaction. Finally, the general understanding of both the wider hobby game culture and a more detailed understanding of the nature of *Magic* helps us appreciate two things: how

hobby gaming differs from other similar fan cultures in important ways, and how the game of *Magic* specifically provides a unique and important experience, even within the greater framework of hobby game fan cultures. These themes are explored in greater detail in the following chapter.

CHAPTER IV

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Lack of Relevant Literature on Hobby Game Fan Cultures

In the early stages of this thesis project I discovered there was a definitive lack of relevant literature on hobby game fan cultures, especially with regard to collectable hobby games. However, a number of film and television fan cultures have been extensively studied. Film and television fan cultures are similar in many structural ways to gaming fan culture, and as a result I decided that a parallel literature review of TV and film fan cultures would provide valuable insight into my exploration of hobby game fandom. I also discovered some parallels within relevant literature on role-playing games that are useful and pertinent to collectable game fan cultures, and I have included these as well.

The connection between hobby gamers and film fans may be stronger than it initially appears. After all, the “cult” aspect of film watching is most often applied to those members of an audience who feel such a deep connection to the object of their hobby they feel the need to interact with it. These fans are no longer satisfied to be simple observers of the object of their fandom, but instead chose to submerge themselves within it through costumes, role-playing, and most importantly social interaction.

No term such as “fan” or “cult” is needed for gamers. Indeed, I would argue that the defining aspect of these “cult” fan cultures—the social interaction based around an existing cultural text—is at the heart of gaming itself. Thus, while it is possible for someone to have a gaming hobby and keep it to themselves (much as someone might be a private collector of *Star Trek* movies and memorabilia) it is, by and large, the exception and not the rule. Gaming is a social activity above all else, and hobby gaming in its myriad forms is defined by the interaction among its members—interaction similar to that which marks cult film fans as “unusual” or “obsessive”.

Academic researchers seem divided when it comes to the significance of fan cultures. Some researchers argue that participants in fan cultures use these cultural texts to create a social identity and

give meaning to their lives (Brooker, 2002: p.3). Others argue that fan cultures are simply leisure groups with little significance, and that the use of cultural texts to create social meaning equates to a form of cultural “poaching” (Jenkins, 1992: 9). I have divided the literature review into three sections, two of which relate to the differing views of fan culture in academia. The reasons behind the academic split in the way that fan culture is viewed are no doubt numerous. However, I believe that the process of cultural visibility, cultural understanding, and cultural acceptance no doubt influenced these works to some extent. The last section deals with literature looking at more broad trends of social interaction in America. These trends helped me reconceptualize many aspects of my research project, how I thought about gaming, and the ways in which it may affect the lives of those involved.

Regardless of individual researchers’ feelings towards fan cultures, it seems evident that they play a strong role, for better or worse, in the lives of participants. This was particularly important to me, as the focus of this research was to explore the role that hobby game fan cultures had (if any) in the lives of those who play them. By establishing that other types of fan cultures affected the lives of those involved (whatever that effect might be), I felt confident that my exploratory project would turn up something interesting.

Fan Culture as a Positive Influence

Being a lifetime *Star Wars* fan, the first work I read was called “Using the Force: Creativity, Community and *Star Wars* Fans” (Brooker, 2002). In this text, Brooker goes to great length to not only address the original *Star Wars* trilogy as a culturally legitimate text, but to discuss how for many fans it is an invaluable method of socializing. He discusses how not just *Star Wars* but all “cult” film fan cultures help people in their daily lives. To illustrate, he describes a group of female *Star Trek* fans who collectively watched videotapes of Kirk and Spock to “mourn the death of a member and come to terms with their own emotional response” (Brooker, 2002: 30). In this way, Brooker demonstrates how these

fan cultures aren't just a collection of costume-wearing freaks but are, in fact, very real social networks that provide love, support, and friendship during hard times.

Brooker also discusses the importance of "cult" films in general (and *Star Wars* in particular) in terms of group interaction, solidarity, positive self-identification, and personal satisfaction, identifying a number of signifiers for "cult" activity, and detailing why these are important. In reference to the film fans' tendency to quote movies, Brooker states that "every time someone delivers half a line of dialogue and another person finishes it, these young men are performing an unacknowledged ritual, celebrating a film they all love and reminding themselves of what they all have in common" (Brooker, 2002: 31). Here we see a form of interaction between the fans and the movie itself. By quoting lines from the movie, fans are reaffirming their identity as fans, identifying with other *Star Wars* lovers, and giving meaning to their social experiences. Instead of simply focusing on the minutiae of *Star Wars* fandom, Brooker's text identified and legitimized a number of behaviors shared by many cult film fans. It was through his work that I originally came to the idea of fandom as a social experience, and this idea has become the basis for this work.

In "Gaming as Culture" (Williams, Hendricks, and Winkler, 2006), the cultural, linguistic, sociological, and psychological impact of fantasy role-playing games are explored, on both an individual and social level. The research on fantasy role-playing groups, while not directly related to this thesis research, is nevertheless the closest parallel to collectable game fan culture I have found. In "Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds", Fine (1983) discusses how the pattern and nature of the games affect the players' social interactions, both within the group and in larger society. Fine does this by immersing himself in several role-playing groups over the course of a year and his study provides a firsthand account of participant observation in leisure studies. It was this work that helped inspire much of the methodology of this research.

In “Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet” (Hellekson and Busse, 2006), the phenomena of online fan fiction for a number of different mediums (including science fiction and fantasy movies, television shows and games) is discussed at length. “Fan Fiction” helped expand my understanding of a social group to include online communities, an aspect of fan culture that I had previously overlooked. More importantly, however, it detailed some of the disadvantages of a strictly digital community, which in turn helped me narrow my qualifications for hobby games by eliminating electronic media from the genre.

Online fan fiction is discussed in a more specific context in Brooker’s “*The Blade Runner Experience: The Legacy of a Science Fiction Classic*” (2006). Brooker discusses multiple aspects of the film *Blade Runner* in vivid detail, including the subculture of fandom that has risen around it. Unlike “Using the Force”, Brooker’s “Blade Runner Experience” focuses on the importance of the subject as art instead of the surrounding fan culture, and the majority of the text was devoted to arguing for the cultural legitimacy of the legendary sci-fi film.

Fan Culture as a Negative Influence

While the works previously mentioned were useful in understanding and forming my ideas on identity and fan culture (particularly the fan culture of hobby gaming), these works also have been the subject of much criticism. The reason for this varies, but often authors immersing themselves in a fan culture and writing about their experiences are seen too subjective. Fine writes that those participating in “leisure studies” often come under criticism from their academic counterparts and in the opening pages of “Shared Fantasy”, Fine states that “sociologists who study leisure typically find themselves attacked on two fronts. First, they are accused of not being sufficiently serious about their scholarly pursuits. Second, they are accused of alchemically transforming that which is inherently fascinating into something as dull as survey research computer tapes” (1983: p.vi).

In “Fan Cultures” (2002), Matt Hills assumes what fandom is in a very general sense, with little reference to cultural connections. He describes a fan as somebody “who is obsessed with a particular star, celebrity, film, TV program, band—somebody who can produce reams of information on their object of fandom, and can quote their favored lines or lyrics, chapter and verse” (Hills, 2002: p.16). Hills seems to view fandom mainly as an act of knowledge accumulation, and knowledge of the object of fandom has been seen to be a vital part of fan culture. Brooker, in “Using the Force” (2002) states that for many *Star Wars* fans’ knowledge of the text is vital in maintaining their identity. However, Hills does not mention the cultural significance of such an activity. Furthermore, he neglects to account for the social interaction involved in the accumulation of fan related knowledge and memorabilia. In the documentary *Trekkies*, we see that large, social conventions are often where people accumulate their Star Trek paraphernalia, and engage each other in social activity through the medium of a shared love for *Star Trek* (Brooker, 2002: p.30). It seems that for Hills, fandom is a solitary existence, an assessment which is at odds with the personal accounts of *Star Wars* fans in “Using the Force”.

Hills also accuses fans of being cultural pirates, an idea that is elaborated upon in Henry Jenkins’ “Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participation Culture” (1993). Intended perhaps as a positive look at fan culture framing TV and film fans as social rebels, Jenkins nevertheless succeeds in implying that fans are incapable of creating meaning for themselves and must use pre-existing texts for this purpose. The implication seems to be that some inspirational sources are more “legitimate” than others, and that those who draw inspiration from genre TV and films are not truly creative. Furthermore, Jenkins neglects to focus on the important social interaction aspects of fan culture, and does not address a vital aspect of many fan cultures—the fact that those fans often become the producers of the culture themselves. Mark Rosewater, the lead designer for *Magic: The Gathering*, was a fan of the game for years, and his intense love of the game drove him to become a part of the company that made it (Rosewater, 2009).

In “The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason” J.P. Telotte (1991) presents a series of essays on cult film fan cultures ranging from *Casablanca* to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Intended, perhaps, as a comprehensive look at “cult film fandom”, the varying essays are presented in two categories: The Classical Cult Film and The Midnight Movie, with little reference to the similarities, differences, or cultural significance of each individual culture. Furthermore, the text completely neglects instances of science fiction movies and television shows as “cult film fandom”, and pays little attention to the social significance of the subcultures discussed. “The Cult Film Experience” (1991) successfully propagates the popular notion of midnight film fans as bizarre deviants, while simultaneously admiring their strange ways—an effect that seems eerily similar to the popularization of the “noble savage” purported in early anthropological texts (Noble Savage, 2008).

The Changing Face of American Community

The study of fan culture provided an initial conceptual framework for my exploration into the social world of *Magic*, but this lacked context. What was needed was a wider view of community and American cultural studies, and found it in Robert Putnam’s “Bowling Alone”. Numerous academics have attempted to chart the changes in American community that have occurred in the last twenty years, ranging from discussions of lowered levels of community involvement to studies of the rise of digital community. Putnam’s seminal work, “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community” (2000) was one of the most important and influential works that I reviewed, and I use much of his terminology to describe the findings of my exploration into the world of *Magic* subculture. Yet Putnam also displayed the anti-fan culture bias so common in academia, largely ignoring these groups. Thus, while I use his most basic ideas to explain the potential social importance of hobby fan culture, I disagree with Putnam’s wider views on the meaning behind the changing face of American community.

In “Bowling Alone”, Putnam argues that social bonds—represented through the notion of “social capital”—are an incredibly powerful and important element of life. The existence (or lack) of social capital for an individual has potent implications for their well-being, and Putnam frames an abundance of social capital as one of the most powerful predictors of life satisfaction (2000: p.19). In many ways Putnam’s ideas appear to mirror widely accepted notions in sociology concerning alienation and feelings of social connectivity. However, Putnam argues that the importance of social capital is not limited to individual well-being, and in fact is an important element in the health and well-being of our society as a whole. He states that “a society characterized by generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society, for the same reason that money is more efficient than barter” (2000: p.21). In this instance, he views social capital as being signified by reciprocity, though it is not limited to this measure. Putnam also makes the argument that social capital influences and impacts political involvement and that in order to have a truly participatory democracy we must have an appropriately high level of social capital in our society (2000 p.35).

It was Putnam more than any other researcher that influenced my understanding of the role that hobby gaming may provide for many participants. In “Bowling Alone” (2000), he argues that life satisfaction is often tied to a feeling of social community and connectivity, and he goes on to argue that social connectivity can be defined as social capital, and that the decline of this capital for many Americans is leading to a growing rate of isolation in our communities. Defining social capital, Putnam also elaborates on its importance and various forms:

Social capital—that is, social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity—comes in many different shapes and sizes with many different uses. Your extended family represents a form of social capital, as do your Sunday school class, the regulars who play poker on your commuter train, your college roommates, the civic organizations to which you belong, the Internet chat group in which you participate, and the network of professional acquaintances recorded in your address book (2000: p. 21).

Putnam acknowledges how often the term “social capital” has been re-invented within the last century (2000: p.19), but his detailed assessment and explanation of the concept appealed to me. Social

capital isn't just an arbitrary term trying to quantify the number of connections in our lives; it is a representation of how many people we can count on, who we can confide in, and how connected we feel to the world around us (2000: p.20). Yet, even this simple view contains a wealth of complexities, and Putnam differentiates between types of capital, detailing that different forms of capital serve different purposes:

Of all the dimensions along which forms of social capital vary, perhaps the most important is the distinction between *bridging* (or inclusive) and *bonding* (or exclusive). Some forms of social capital are, by choice or necessity, inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups. Examples of bonding social capital include ethnic fraternal organizations, church-based women's reading groups, and fashionable country clubs. Other networks are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages. Examples of bridging social capital include the civil rights movement, many youth service groups, and ecumenical religious organizations . . . bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity, whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves (2000: p.22-23).

Putnam makes what I believe to be an effective argument for the importance of both bridging and bonding capital, and his division of social capital into bridging (inclusive forms, allowing us to make new relationships) and bonding (exclusive forms, allowing us to reinforce existing relationships) was perhaps the most influential element in my understanding of the role hobby game culture played in the lives of participants.

However, there are critiques of Putnam's arguments. Putnam views social capital as comprising mainly traditional primary groups such as families and close-knit groups of friends at the individual level, and as traditional forms of civic participation (such as involvement in organizations and groups) as representing social capital on a larger level. His central argument seems to be that trends in the reduction of family size and friend groups, as well as increases in divorce rates, indicate the overall shrinking of individual social capital. Furthermore, the decline in voter participation, civic participation, and the shrinking of traditional groups such as Rotary clubs displays the reduction of social capital on a larger scale. According to Putnam, social bonds in America are shrinking, and this has dire consequences.

The evidence of a decline in traditional forms of community came as no surprise to me, though the level to which this has occurred is shocking. However, the end result may not be as catastrophic as Putnam envisions. An argument can be made that social capital is not disappearing, but is simply changing—and hobby game fan culture represents one form into which it is changing. Indeed, the advent of participatory fan-driven cultures is a far cry from the traditional, structured organizations that Putnam seems to view as the “true” form of bridging capital in America.

Putnam often fails to give credence to changing or new forms of social capital, and seems to dismiss electronic media (and by extension groups involved or connected through electronic media) as being irrelevant. This is best evidenced in Putnam’s original article, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital” (1995). In this article, he approaches potential reasons behind the decline of American community in a much more concise way than that presented in his book, and one of his possible reasons for this decline is the technological transformation of leisure.

There is reason to believe that deep-seated technological trends are radically ‘privatizing’ or ‘individualizing’ our use of leisure time and thus disrupting many opportunities for social-capital formation. The most obvious and probably the most powerful instrument of this revolution is television . . . in the language of economics, electronic technology enables individual tastes to be satisfied more fully, but at the cost of the positive social externalities associated with more primitive forms of entertainment (1995: p.75).

Putnam is not alone in his condemnation of technology and its negative impact on community. In the article, “The Ties That Bind Are Fraying,” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears, 2008) this idea is expanded to internet culture as well. According to these authors, “some researchers suggest computer technology may foster a wider, less localized array of weak ties, replacing the strong, tightly interconnected ties to confidants that we measured here [close friends and confidants],” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears, 2008: p. 35).

Not all academics dismiss the potential significance of online culture. Brooker, for example, spends much time discussing the positive effects online cultures have in their participants’ lives. Of particular note is the fact that Brooker utilized these online fan communities to actually perform much

of his research (2002). The ideas of online community and their benefits were expanded on in the article “‘Oh No! I’m a Nerd!’: Hegemonic Masculinity on an Online Forum” (Kendall, 2000). Author Lori Kendall discusses how the online community is vital in the social wellbeing of participants. According to Kendall, online community provides more than a mere pastime. In many ways the online community has helped them reclaim the formerly pejorative term “nerd”, as well as helping members define and refine a sense of masculinity (2000: p.262).

Nevertheless, these works acknowledge the difference between face-to-face interaction and the interaction provided by electronic communities, with Brooker and Kendall both seeing the most important elements of the online community as a way in which to access new groups and eventually build personal relationships in the “real” world. With these ideas in mind, and considering the importance of face-to-face interaction in hobby gaming fan culture, I set aside any ideas I had of accessing a greater number of *Magic* fans through online communities and settled on a study that would focus on studying a fairly diverse group of players in a centralized location. Yet, the assertion by academics that electronic community lacks importance failed to ring true to me, and indeed bore many resemblances to the rejection of fan culture as relevant. If anything, this only reinforced my belief in the potential importance of fan cultures. After all, while fan cultures may not be involved in “civic engagement” in the traditional sense, they have the potential to fulfill many of these roles. The Child’s Play charity started, operated, and funded by the fan culture of video gamers (About Child’s Play, 2010) is a prime example of this.

Putnam’s explanation of the two different types of social capital changed how I thought about *Magic* fan culture, providing me with language and concepts to appropriately describe the effects this fan culture might have on the lives of those who play. Using Putnam’s terminology, we can see that there are elements of both bridging and bonding social capital in many fan cultures. However, the exact nature of this capital requires some thought. On the one hand, fan cultures provide a way for fans to

expand their social groups and connect with other like-minded people (existing fans) or make friends with people with similar interests (parallel fans). At the same time, the exclusive nature of many fan cultures may actually prevent people from being able to connect to people in other important ways. This is especially true with regard to fan cultures that may be seen as deviant or subversive in the wider culture. If this is indeed true, then these fan cultures may best serve those that are involved with them by providing a close-knit sense of unity and, for male members, fraternity.

While I disagree with Putnam on the grim direction American society is taking, I agree that bridging and bonding social capital are important for the individual. Furthermore, I believe that fan cultures (and *Magic* culture in particular) may provide this expanded social capital for those involved. These groups may not match Putnam's somewhat narrow vision of the groups needed to compose and sustain a participatory democracy, but they certainly allow those involved to increase contact with other people (make new friends) and reinforce existing positive identity and social bonds. I do not doubt that for those involved, *Magic* provides a form of social capital, but I am unsure as to what kind of capital it may be, and how it influences those involved. I have experienced what could be considered both bridging and bonding capital in my life due to involvement with hobby games. Yet hobby games have not been as influential for everyone as they have for me. So, with this in mind, I must add to my research queries. If *Magic*, as with many fan cultures, can be understood to foster the development of social capital, what kind of capital does it most importantly produce for those involved?

CHAPTER V

METHODOLOGY

Research Goals

My positive personal experiences with hobby games have led me to believe that both hobby games and hobby game fan culture can be an important, positive contribution to one's social life and social identity. However, this may not be the case for all hobby gamers, and it is with this in mind that I sought to explore and better understand the role hobby games have played and play in the lives of other participants. One of the central ideas I wanted to explore was that of the social nature of hobby game fandom. How does the social nature of hobby fandom differ from other, similar fan culture experiences? Can these differences—particularly the negative backlash against hobby game fan cultures, or the overall cultural ignorance of them—impact a gamer's perceptions of self? And what role does *Magic* play in the lives of those involved in this fan culture? By exploring these ideas, I hoped to shed light on an interesting and unique fan culture that has received little attention either from academia or the media.

Personal Methodology

There are numerous similarities between hobby game fan culture and TV and film fan culture, and much of the work in my literature review informed the methodology of this thesis research. I found the studies of fan cultures using ethnographic methods to be the most useful, and so it was to these that I initially turned. I knew that as a member of *Magic* fan culture I would need to exercise caution while researching. Brooker dealt with similar issues, as "Using the Force" (2002) was born partly out of his love of *Star Wars*, and his work on *Blade Runner* was possible only because of his extensive knowledge of the subject matter. In "Using the Force", Brooker conducted a number of interviews with small-sized friend groups connected through their love and fandom of *Star Wars*, allowing them to discuss and

elaborate the meaning that these films (and the associated fan culture) had on their lives. Gary Allen Fine's approach differed somewhat, as he was not initially a member of the culture. In his research on early role-playing cultures (1983), he spent over a year watching, playing, and interacting with groups of roleplayers, becoming a member of the fan culture over the course of his research. The methods of questioning and interviewing displayed in these two studies influenced me tremendously, giving me a reference point and helping me begin the process of creating my research process.

However, the ethnographic studies of fan cultures that influenced me were often framed within the context of different academic disciplines, such as communications, film studies, or anthropology. Furthermore, Fine and Brooker approached their research differently than I wanted to approach mine. Both used group interviewing practices, focusing often on discussions with clusters of small friend-based subcultures, and both had varying methods for locating those willing to discuss their fandom and the nature of it—Brooker utilized online fan sites to find friend groups, and Fine devoted significant time and energy to gaining cultural acceptance so as to gain access to groups of roleplayers.

I knew how I wanted to perform the research, leaning more towards personal one-on-one interviews instead of group studies. Yet this was just a vague notion, and I was initially unsure how to proceed. Fortunately, there exists a wealth of information concerning the sociological exploration of small groups and subcultures, and it was to these that I turned. In the article, "Methods of Symbolic Interactionism", Nancy Herman-Kinney and Joseph Verschaeve (2003) explore the history, philosophy and methodology of symbolic interactionism. Their discussion of "sympathetic introspection" and their exploration of the concept, subjective realism, were key in developing the methodologies for this thesis research, and helped me create a framework for discussion that would be sensitive to the feelings of those interviewed.

The methodological approaches adopted by the early Chicago School researchers were of interest to me, being prime examples of sociological ethnography. Of more practical value, however, were

recent works that framed the Chicago School and their methods in a modern context. The article, “The Chicago School”, by Gil Musolf (2003) presents a concise and informative history of this school, describing the various methods, their evolution, and the advent of the second Chicago School. In his book “Sociology and Public Affairs: The Chicago School” (1975), Jim Carey details many elements of the classic Chicago research movement, emphasizing the nature of their work and how they let respondents describe their own experiences in their own words. I knew this would be vital for my own research, and both Musolf and Carey were instrumental in helping me understand and utilize many aspects of the methodology used by early Chicagoans.

The ethnographic works of fan cultures from a multitude of disciplines strongly informed my methods, especially the work of Brooker and Fine. Yet, it was through an understanding of symbolic interactionism and a modernized version of the Chicago school’s original ethnographic methods that I was able to apply these methods to the fan culture of *Magic* players. The most obvious criticism of any exploration into a culture one is already familiar with is that of subjectivity—the idea that, having a personal investment in the culture, the researcher is unable to present an “unbiased” view. The methods of symbolic interactionism I researched helped me to move past such idealistic notions and realize that there is no such thing as full objectivity when it comes to sociological understanding and insight. As a result, the inner workings and influence on certain groups are revealed best not from some distant, objective perspective, but through a process of listening, learning, and allowing those interviewed or observed to describe their own experiences. Once comfortable with this idea, I came to believe that the only person able to navigate the true depths of a culture as complex as that of hobby games is one who is immersed within it.

Development of Questions

In order to explore the meaning that being a *Magic* player has for those involved, I set out to interview 25 hobby gamers in gaming stores and at *Magic* tournaments throughout Michigan. By doing this, I hoped to gain a greater understanding and perspective of hobby game fan culture, as well as gaining insight into the ways in which gaming fan culture enhanced social skills and helped build positive self-identity. However, the first step in this process was the development of the questions that would prompt the respondents to openly discuss their experiences.

One of the most time-consuming aspects of this thesis research was the development and approval of my interview questions. Having a background primarily in quantitative research, I initially found creating questions for a qualitative research project difficult. The literature I reviewed pointed me in the right direction, but I still struggled with how best to apply the concepts of the Chicago School style of interviewing to the culture of hobby gaming. Not only did I need to find a way to develop research questions that would prompt those interviewed to discuss their life experiences in their own words, I also had to contend with getting my questions and my interview process approved by the Institutional Review Board. While I felt my research was relatively harmless, I nevertheless understood that I would have to go through the same process as those studying more sensitive topics.

My first rejection by the IRB came as a disappointment and a shock. I foolishly assumed that I would get everything right the first time, and move on quickly. This was not to be the case. In addition to problems with the structure and nature of many of my questions (such as vagueness, leading questions, and double questions), I also initially had trouble navigating the maze of details surrounding an approved consent form. For some reason my consent form was the sticking point, being the part that I had to re-write numerous times.

After a number of rejections and re-writes, my questions, consent form, and interview process were eventually all approved. I felt confident in my (as yet unattempted) research, especially

considering the amount of time and energy I devoted to sorting out the details so as to get IRB approval. Looking back, I realize now the simple mistakes I made in formatting that would have made the process much easier. However, even IRB approval didn't ensure that my questions would yield insightful information. My background as a quantitative researcher still shone through during many phases of the interview, making certain aspects of the research process much more difficult.

Breakdown of Questions

Overall I was pleased with the questions I developed, and believed that they would lead to interesting and revealing discussions. My questions were designed to accomplish two tasks: first of all, I wanted inquiries that would help facilitate free-flowing conversation where the respondent was able to discuss things openly, expressing their own ideas and experiences about the game without input or leading questions. This methodological process was inspired by the classic works of the Chicago School, and refined through the study of historical and sociological studies framing those works in a modern context. My questions also needed to be forward enough that I could ask them in a simple, straightforward answer. I knew that not all respondents would be forthcoming or have a desire for lengthy discussion, and as a result my questions needed to not only be able to prompt or facilitate discussion but also, when the respondent desired, be responded to in an easy and forthright fashion.

My questions fell into four broad sets of questions, each designed to prompt the respondent to discuss the various roles *Magic* had played in their lives. The first set of questions pertained to the respondents' personal history, particularly their history of playing *Magic*. I took a leap of faith that most people learned the game in adolescence, and as a result many of these questions pertained to this aspect of their lives. I was curious how people had started playing the game, and additionally, I hoped to ascertain the role it had played (if any) early in their lives, and how this affected their view of *Magic*.

The second set of questions were intended to be fairly straightforward, and create a framework that would allow me understand their current involvement both within *Magic* and the larger hobby game culture. I wanted to know which hobby games they played other than *Magic* (if any), and if they had started with *Magic*. I also wanted to know how much time they put into the game (both socially and by themselves) throughout the week, and how many of their friends played. Through these questions, I felt that I would ascertain a feel for how seriously they took the game. This would help me understand not just the level of personal importance they accorded the game, but also the social manner in which they played the game—whether it was primarily with close, intimate friends, in large casual settings, or something else altogether.

I hoped the third set of questions would lead to the longest and most interesting discussions. These questions asked each respondent to discuss why they played *Magic*, what they loved and hated about it, and what impact it had on their life, if any. I felt these questions were the most important, and would be the most revealing as to the role *Magic* played in the lives of those interviewed. They allowed the respondent to discuss, in their own words and at their own leisure, their personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings about the game. While the earlier questions would help me understand the context for their feelings on hobby games and hobby game fan cultures, these responses would provide the most insightful content.

The last set of questions were the most personal, and by asking them last I had the length of the entire interview to put the respondent at ease and make them feel comfortable. I believed that I would be more likely to get honest, in-depth responses about personal experiences by discussing these last. My interviews generally concluded with me asking directly how important *Magic* was in their lives, asking them to define just what “important” meant, and where the game ranked compared to other hobbies, responsibilities, and relationships. The list of questions I asked during my interviews can be found in Appendix D: Interview questions.

Research Process

All the interviews for this thesis research were either conducted or set up at the Hall of Heroes comic and card shop in Mount Pleasant, MI, between August 15th and September 4th of 2009. I initially intended to only do some of my research at the Hall. However, the players proved to be more socially diverse than I expected, and I decided that for my first sociological exploration into hobby fan culture it would be easiest to keep the research close to home. Due to the well-known nature of the store and its owner, as well as the fact that it is the only store of its type within mid-Michigan, with the owner's permission, I have not changed his name or the name of the store.

For each interview, I gave the potential respondent a copy of my statement of purpose and asked them to read it. On this statement was my intentions for the project (in broad terms, so that I did not encourage certain types of answers), as well as contact info for both the college and my thesis committee. I offered each potential respondent the right to review the interview when it was done, and the right to request my taking anything out they were not comfortable with. Finally, I explained the interview process. Using a digital recorder, I would tape each interview, then later go back and transcribe them.

I have known the proprietor, Michael Travis, for many years, and he was more than willing to let me conduct my interviews there. The Hall of Heroes has dozens of tables, multiple rooms, and ample seating, and I found there was almost always a quiet corner to conduct the interviews in between games. While I was familiar with Michael and the store, it had been well over a year and a half since I had spent much time there socially. As a result I was friendly with a couple old regulars, but otherwise knew very few people. The crowd had changed over time, due largely to Mount Pleasant being a college town, and I found out that most of the people I knew through the store from my prior time there had married, graduated, or otherwise moved on with their lives.

I only interviewed people I was unfamiliar with, and the most contact I had with anyone prior to the interview was by playing a game of *Magic* first, or occasionally playing a game and then setting up an interview for a later date. As stated, I had originally planned to conduct 25 interviews. However, by the time I had interviewed 23 people I felt I had reached research saturation. One of the interviews I conducted was too garbled due to poor equipment and an excess of background noise, and as a result I was left with 22 interviews. The shortest of these lasted just under five minutes, and the longest lasted almost a half an hour. Needless to say, each person's level of comfort at being interviewed, the desire to share private information with a stranger, the enthusiasm for the game or various other aspects of hobby culture, and individual personality all became strong factors in the length of the interview.

I undertook most of the interviews on "tournament days"—days in which small local *Magic* tournaments ranging from at least 8 to upwards of 20 people were held at the store. On tournament days, people are ready to (and indeed expect to) interact with people they may not know, and I believed that this would give me an easier time getting people to agree to the interview. Due to the extra time between rounds, I found that most of my respondents were more than happy to "kill a few minutes" while they waited for their next opponent to be called. On two occasions I had to stop the interview and start it again later due to a round being started, yet both times we were able to pick up where we left off without any real disruption in the conversation.

There are always challenges in any research project. In this particular project, I believed that difficulties would most likely arise if the potential respondent felt uncomfortable in any way—either at the prospect of discussing personal aspects of their lives or fandom with a stranger, or at the idea of trying to explain the game and hobby to someone who doesn't understand it. However, these fears were unfounded. I believe that this occurred for two main reasons: First of all, the setting where the discussions took place was one where all of the hobby gamers felt comfortable. At the Hall of Heroes, both playing and talking about *Magic* are accepted norms, and as such the idea of discussing these

elements of their lives (and any potentially personal or difficult aspects of their lives that related to their involvement of the game) seemed natural. The second reason I encountered little difficulty was that the respondents all realized that I was a fellow hobby gamer, and often had seen me playing *Magic* (or had played *Magic* with me themselves). This created a level of understanding and comfort that may have been lacking had I presented myself strictly as a social researcher, rather than as a fellow hobby gamer looking to explore the role of the game in people's lives.

In order to be more familiar with those I intended to interview, I visited the store a few times on tournament days prior to starting the process of finding and interviewing *Magic* players. While spending time there I chatted with the store owner extensively, played a few casual games with old friends, caught up on gossip, made a few purchases, and generally made my presence known. I have a strong, outgoing personality and can be quite boisterous in social situations that I'm comfortable with. This assisted me, and I knew that having been "seen around" would make getting people to agree to the interview much easier than if I approached them as a total stranger.

Numerous other aspects aided me in finding people willing to discuss personal stories and the effect *Magic* had on their lives. To gain honest, open insight through these discussions, I believed it was necessary not only to be taken seriously as a "researcher", but also to re-immense myself in the culture. Within the context of the hobby store subculture, I knew it would be more necessary for me to be respected more as a hobby gamer than as an academic. I needed to be seen not just as a graduate student doing an interview, but as a legitimate member of the *Magic* world. Having lived my life immersed in hobby game fan culture, this wasn't difficult for me, and I am able to "talk the talk" with the best of them. Yet, the personal nature of the interviews meant that I would need to be seen as a fellow gamer—one who had something in common with them specifically, who appeared at home in the environment of the subculture, and who had a good deal of status within the subculture. As with all

subcultures, status plays a strong role in how hobby gamers react to each other. Knowing this, I made sure to increase my status at the Hall of Heroes prior to beginning my interviews.

I accomplished this in a number of ways. First, I am friends with the store owner, and as such am accorded special (if minor) privileges, including free sodas and the ability to go behind the store counter unsupervised. Second, the few friends I still had there were a part of the Hall's social network, giving me secondary and tertiary social connections. This helped, as certain people (friends of friends) seemed more willing to do the interview due to my part in the social circle. Furthermore, my social links to local minor *Magic* playing legends—along with a few stories of sweet victory and hilarious defeat—presented me as a skilled, if somewhat rusty, player.

Another important aspect in increasing my social status at the Hall was my ability to bring an air of legitimacy to the hobby. While few of my respondents mentioned the desire for *Magic* to be seen as more culturally accepted, they nevertheless were intrigued by the idea of academic research based on hobby games. I achieved an air of legitimacy in two ways: First, I was formerly a writer for an online *Magic* website, a fact well-known by many of the people there. Second, and most importantly, I presented myself as a graduate student and a social researcher, aiming to focus the lens of academia on the hobby of *Magic* cards. However, I often downplayed the seriousness of my research; while never compromising the integrity of the study or breaching any research ethics, I would make lighthearted cracks about how I “conned” my professors into letting me do my thesis on “something fun”. As a result, I was able to present myself as a gamer first and an academic second. While transcribing the interviews and detailing my findings, I made sure to give each of my interviewees a cover name. Each cover name reminds me of a particular respondent for a personal reason that would not be clear to outsiders. As such, I was able to keep their confidence while not losing the personal and individual qualities that each person who was interviewed brought to the discussions.

Once I had re-established myself as a member of the culture I decided it was time to begin my exploration into the world of *Magic* fandom. With no fanfare or announcement, I simply attended a small Monday tournament of eight people at the Hall of Heroes with the intent of finding at least one person willing to discuss the impact *Magic* had on their life. Prior to my interviews that day, I engaged in some light socializing—I knew one person there and chatted with him a little bit prior to playing, as well as talking with Michael, the store owner. I then sat down to play in my first *Magic* tournament in almost two years. My plan was to simply see who I played against and, if I didn't know them, ask if they would mind doing an interview following the conclusion of the game. Luckily, this plan of action worked well.

I was well aware of the importance of rapport building as a key element in conducting successful interviews. Instead of creating specific strategies for building rapport, I planned on utilizing the existing cultural text (in this case, *Magic*) and the interaction created through playing to allow me to connect to those I was interviewing. Even in the instances where I didn't play with the respondent I was interviewing, the joint interest in *Magic* provided a backdrop for comfortable conversation, easing tensions for both the respondents and myself. In some instances the discussion of mutual hobby games or other “nerdy” activities and cultures (such as *Star Wars* or comic book fandom) served the same function as a discussion of *Magic*, but almost all respondents and I discussed *Magic* specifically, talking about our views on it and our experiences with it before, during, and after the interview. The extent to which I planned my rapport building methods actually concerned my successful attempts to re-integrate into the specific subculture at the Hall of Heroes prior to my interviews. I believed that if I was seen as a researcher first and a *Magic* player second, respondents would perceive my discussions of *Magic* differently (perhaps that I was “trying too hard”), and this could negatively impact my attempts at building rapport with them.

This rapport building strategy worked well, and eased the fear of conducting my first interview. Instead of jumping straight into a personal discussion I was able to interact with my first respondent prior to the interview. I sat down to play with Spencer, who would be my very first respondent. After three hard-fought games he ended up winning the round. Following this, I asked in a good-natured fashion if he'd mind doing the interview and he happily agreed. I was quite nervous, and there was a fair amount of interference from people who didn't realize what was happening—after all, we were simply interviewing at a back table in a room at a hobby store! Multiple interruptions occurred, including someone asking him a rules question and someone asking him to trade cards. Nevertheless, the interview went very well, setting a good precedent for my future interviews and fueling my self-confidence.

My second interview went much the same as the first. Manny, a quiet young man, was my second opponent in the tournament. After two short games I emerged the victor, and I wondered if this would impact his likelihood to do the interview. It fortunately did not, and throughout all the games I played, winning or losing never affected anyone's willingness to be interviewed. Once again, the interaction provided by *Magic* was the perfect way to build rapport, and we discussed the game long after the interview had concluded. After a few interview sessions, other players grew curious about my project, and this also contributed to the ease with which I found people willing to discuss the game and its impact on their lives. Sometimes players would approach me and ask what I was doing, to which I generally responded that I was doing research on *Magic*, and were they interested in being interviewed.

Initially I was worried that people who I had interviewed would disrupt my research by revealing the questions to other potential respondents. Luckily, this fear was not realized. Once my discussion with a respondent had concluded, they kept the content of the interview to themselves, and I didn't hear anyone talking about it in any detail to others. They seemed to treat it as a simple discussion of *Magic*, a common enough occurrence at a hobby store that warranted little extra thought. At no point

during my interviews did any of the respondents indicate that they knew the questions I would ask, the direction the conversation would go, or the answers they thought I was looking for. There were a few instances that felt like the respondent was answering out of social desirability. However, the social desirability seemed to be generated towards adjusting how I viewed them as a person and not a gamer, and mostly concerned the exaggeration of sexual conquests and social exploits. As these were not about the social world of *Magic*, I attributed them simply to being a normal part of a conversation between young men. Finally, I asked Michael and my other friends (including those friends I made through the research early on) to keep an ear to the ground and let me know if people were discussing the research. Apparently, no one mentioned my research or interviews except in passing. I was grateful that the integrity of my project wasn't compromised.

I completed all of my interviews in a very brief time span, either conducting them or setting up appointments in about a half-dozen visits. It seemed to me that many of my respondents elected to be interviewed out of curiosity, boredom, or a simple good natured decision to help a fellow *Magic* player out with a school project. Yet, I believe it was more than simple curiosity that drove the rapid success of my research. During the brief games we played (or even just through discussing *Magic* casually before the interview) I made a very fast, very real connection to many of the other players at the store, leading to almost all the people I asked agreeing to be interviewed. Out of everyone that I asked to participate, only two people declined.

One of my goals initially was to explore the idea that one could quickly make and develop friendships just by playing *Magic*—or, to use the language of Putnam, to see how efficient *Magic* was as a form of bridging social capital. This succeeded beyond my original hopes. While at the store (both when playing *Magic* and doing interviews) I quickly developed a loose group of acquaintances who soon became friends. I became extremely close with three of the respondents in particular, and over a year later I still count them among my close friends. After only playing and interviewing people at the Hall

twice, I felt like a regular, and after three times, I felt like a key member of the social environment. Even those who I didn't interview (either due to an unwillingness on their part, or simply due to circumstance) soon recognized me as a member of the local culture, and I quickly began to feel as comfortable at the Hall as ever. The one downside was that I felt compelled to keep my distance from those I hadn't interviewed yet, as that would eliminate the pool of potential respondents. This sometimes limited my non-*Magic* and non-research interactions, but was never a serious problem for me.

Sample Descriptions

My respondents were all young, white males, the youngest being 18 and the oldest being in his early 30's. Overwhelmingly, the respondents were in their mid-20's and from working class, lower-middle class, or middle-class backgrounds. This was unsurprising to me, as for many "nerdy" fan cultures, the main adherents are well known to be young white middle class males. Notably, every single person I interviewed was male, and in fact during all the weeks I played and conducted research at the Hall of Heroes, I only played against one female. The limited profile of these respondents was well within my expectations, and does not necessarily indicate a lack of variety. In "The Ties that Bind are Fraying" (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears, 2008), the authors elaborate that often groups or cultures with similar age and ethnic makeup still retain a degree of diversity; "while clubs, neighborhood associations, and workplaces are often segregated in terms of race, class, and gender, they are still more diverse than most families" (2008, p.36). I would argue that hobby fan cultures also fall within these categories, and while they are less diverse than some groups, they are certainly not homogenous.

A common trend among my respondents initially escaped my notice, despite its seeming obviousness. All of my respondents were males. This was no accident, as during the weeks of my research I neither talked to nor played *Magic* with any women at the Hall of Heroes. This may be another difference between hobby game fan culture and other, similar cultures. While both Brooker

(2002) and Fine (1983) encountered numerous women during their research and Kendall (1992) has entire chapters devoted to female *Star Trek* fandom, in my experience the involvement of women in playing *Magic* has always been extremely limited.

The lack of research on hobby fan cultures prevents me from presenting more general findings on this phenomenon, but my own extensive experience with *Magic* may provide some insight. In 16 years of playing *Magic*, with tens of thousands of games played against hundreds of different people, I have met maybe a half dozen females who played *Magic*. Every single one of these females was, at the time, dating a man involved in playing *Magic*, and from my understanding all of them had started playing after their significant other introduced them to the game. The overwhelming maleness of hobby gaming fan culture initially escaped my notice, for it is something that has simply always existed in my life. I have never dated anyone interested in playing, and indeed any time a girlfriend has had to come into a hobby store for any reason they have always been extremely uncomfortable.

There may be any number of reasons for this. Being an almost exclusively male experience, the idea of being a woman and becoming involved in such a culture may be intimidating. Yet, in my experience, *Magic* players tend to be quite inclusive of other gamers, particularly women. If there are social problems for female players, they are far more likely to revolve around the undesired amount of attention any female playing *Magic* inevitably attracts than any kind of barrier to involvement in the culture. Another possibility for the almost exclusive male involvement can be found in the socialization of American children. *Magic* is a game of fantasy action, following a long legacy of male-dominated media where men of purpose such as Conan the Barbarian, He-Man, and Aragorn face off against mythical creatures and save the day. Female-generated fantasy tends to revolve more around modern retellings of traditional fairy tales, best epitomized by any number of Disney films. The idea of *Magic* as a factor in gender socialization is discussed in Chapter VI: Findings.

There is another possibility. Perhaps women are less attracted to *Magic* because they need it less. After all, male interaction and conversation is often seen in our culture as suspiciously homoerotic. As a result, men are far more likely to be lonely than women, who may be less likely to experience problems expressing themselves or interacting with other same-gendered friends. If this is the case, *Magic* is an important experience indeed, giving young men and male adolescents a “safe” and acceptable path to social interaction, in much the same way as the discussion of sports allows both young and older men in the wider culture to safely interact. I am not sure what to believe, or how to explain the incredibly single-gendered nature of the game. Ultimately, however, the reasons for this gender separation in hobby fan culture may be beyond the scope of this project.

Many of the respondents appreciated similar aspects of *Magic* or the *Magic* fan culture they were a part of (as I shall present in my findings), yet how they saw *Magic*, how they viewed it in their lives, what aspects of it they enjoyed or disliked, and the specific role that the game itself played in their lives varied a great deal. While almost every respondent discussed the social aspects of *Magic* in a positive light, the actual role the game played in their social lives and social circles varied a great deal. Some based their entire lives around hobby gaming or *Magic*. Others rarely played, but discussed the role that *Magic* had previously played in their lives. While responses varied among individuals, there were a number of common patterns and themes that emerged during the discussions.

CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS

One of the most gratifying and rewarding aspects of my exploration into the world of *Magic* fan culture was the willingness that most respondents showed to enter the interview process. The conversations tended to be casual and enjoyable, which I suppose is hardly a surprise considering that the subject matter was a mutual hobby that is engaging on a number of levels. The respondents seemed to particularly enjoy discussing the aspects of the game they appreciated most, what *Magic* provided for them, and why they played. Through the discussions, I hoped to discover more thoroughly:

- 1) How involvement in hobby game fan culture differed from other, similar fan cultures;
- 2) How adherents to hobby game fan cultures perceived themselves and the games they play;
- 3) How these perceptions were influenced by wider cultural perceptions of hobby games;
- 4) What role—if any—these games themselves play in the life of the gamer; and
- 5) How *Magic* (as with many fan cultures) can be understood as a form of social capital, and what kind of capital it represents for those involved.

Although responses often varied, a number of common themes arose.

The Social and Personal Impact of *Magic*

The overwhelming majority of respondents discussed *Magic* not just as a game, but as an inherently social act. Furthermore, most of these respondents seemed to feel good about how *Magic* affected their social lives—indeed, when asked their favorite aspect of *Magic*, many more discussed the intangible social nature of the game than specific aspects of the game itself. Examples included the ability to meet new people through *Magic*, using *Magic* as a foundation on which to further develop existing and important relationships, or appreciating that *Magic* often provides a way to get together and blow off steam with the guys. While most talked about the impact of the game on their social lives, a few others also discussed how the game affected their self-perception. Some described this as an

increase in self-confidence, positively influencing their self-esteem and helping them develop a sense of self-worth: Others were able to “use the game to access their creative sides”, or to “utilize *Magic* as an artistic expression of self”. It should be noted that in the following text, when I refer to “social aspects” or “personal aspects” and then provide no further elaboration, I am referencing an impact on the respondents’ lives similar to that described in Chapter Two: Personal Background.

Common Themes

Each respondent gave a very personal and individualized account of how *Magic* affected their life, and the social nature of the game (for those that discussed it) was no different. These disparate and personal responses seemed to represent larger, more specific themes, many of which were social in nature. The general theme that varied the most was the use of *Magic* as a way to increase self-confidence or change self-perception positively; the inherently personal nature of such changes meant that even when the game impacted respondents’ lives in a similar fashion, the effect it had could be quite different.

By far the most common theme was the use of *Magic* as a way to bridge social gaps, make new friends, and expand existing social groups. However, a number of respondents also discussed how *Magic* was more important not as a way to make new friends but rather to bond with existing ones, creating stronger ties within existing social circles. A few respondents even referred to the “brotherhood” of *Magic*. This idea was expanded upon in a very real sense for many of those interviewed, as a great many actually learned the game from older brothers or older brother figures. This, in turn, painted a picture of *Magic* as both a form of alternate gender socialization and as a grassroots phenomenon, being taught and spread on a microsocial level with little outside influence. As with any grassroots activity, physical locations and meeting places had a large influence on the culture,

and the importance of the hobby store as not just a physical location but as a social location was another common theme.

The responses towards *Magic* were not universally positive and one of the more common themes was a dislike of the “cost” of playing *Magic*, whether that cost was defined in money, time, or friends. Most of the respondents didn’t feel as though the game had a severe social cost, but there were some notable exceptions. One respondent, Chester, felt the social cost of *Magic* keenly, and another, Grover, believed he had let the game take over his life, and that his involvement with *Magic* had carried a steep cost in time and family connections. These deviant cases were particularly interesting and provided an alternate viewpoint to that of the majority of respondents.

Positive Personal Impact from Gaming

The majority of respondents, when discussing the positive impact *Magic* had on their lives, talked about these themes in social terms. The respondent James was a strong proponent of *Magic* in many ways, but always stressed how the social elements built into the game were the most significantly positive in his life. Daniel and many others seemed to share this view, but some respondents found that involvement in the game had a more inward, personal impact on their lives. For some, *Magic* provided a way to find and access the creative spark within themselves. Peter described the game as being a fun exercise in intelligence, approaching the creative aspects of the game from a somewhat analytical perspective. Grover approached it in a more free-form fashion, and described the “creative unique deck building” and “the aspect of creating something for yourself” as being keys to his enjoyment of the game.

One of the fundamental elements to hobby games is the ability to invest oneself both personally and creatively. While some players don’t utilize this, for others it is the most important aspect of these games. *Magic* does not require this investment, but some players find that when they do invest

themselves the experience is personally rewarding. Daniel listed both the creative and competitive aspects of the game as important, stating that his favorite part of the game is “that sense of satisfaction I get when a 60 card creation comes together and just blows somebody’s face apart!”

For Daniel, the competition in *Magic* is not about just winning or losing, but in how well his creativity and originality holds up in the face of tried and true decks. Daniel enjoyed winning at *Magic*, but insisted on doing it on his terms—a theme that was reflected not just in what he enjoyed about the game, but what he disliked about it as well:

[My least favorite part of the game is when] you really put your heart and soul into a deck, and you playtest it, and you know it’s good, and you know that it works, and you know that it runs perfect when you want it to run, and having it bomb, just like—none of the cards work, or somebody points out one card difference, like ‘oh wait that reads differently and it doesn’t work this way’, and it’s like you’re already halfway through FNM playing with a deck you can’t switch, and you’re like wow, my combo doesn’t work. Or this doesn’t work. And it’s just the sinking feeling you get, like ‘oh, all this hard work is like trashed’!

The amount of himself that Daniel invested in *Magic* clearly indicated how important it was in his personal life. He also enjoyed the sense of self-improvement the game gave him, stating that while could be frustrating losing, with a deck of one’s own creation, the trial and error aspect of the game was appealing. Some respondents felt similarly. In addition to the social bonds *Magic* provided, James valued the game as a personal improvement tool; when asked what his favorite aspect of the game was, he stated it was “the feeling you get when you know you’re getting better . . . it feels good to constantly get better at something.”

Other players also felt strongly about the confidence boost gained by excelling at *Magic*. Charles stated that he had always been an under-confident person, and when he began playing *Magic* he assumed he would always lose. Through the game he was able to turn this attitude around, and stated that “[*Magic*] has helped me gain more confidence . . . I believe in myself a little more now.” Although many of the respondents did not discuss these personal elements of themselves in any way, those that expressed similar experiences tended to feel strongly about them. Carpenter views his ability

at *Magic* as something to be proud of not just within the confines of the subculture, but in his entire life. When asked how hobby gaming influenced or impacted his life, he discussed the boost in self-esteem he had gained through involvement in the fan culture:

It has made me more confident, in some areas. You know, it helps to have something that you're good at, you know? You may be good at sports or whatever, but I'm good at *Magic*. So it's that little thing that I can look back on and say 'yeah they might have beat me here, but I can totally stomp them if we played *Magic*!'

While he loved the game, Charles didn't approach it in as creative a fashion as some of the other respondents who felt it was personally important. A self-described hardcore tournament player, he was more than willing to use someone else's deck idea, provided that it was an effective way to win. I believe this indicates once more the varied nature of hobby games—Charles drew a large level of self-confidence from his participation in a game, without having to invest a significant amount of creativity.

Fewer respondents than I had anticipated discussed the personal aspects of the game and how they impacted their lives. As the game was so important personally to me, perhaps I went into the research expecting to find that was the case with other people. Alternately, the somewhat limited discussion of personal aspects may have been affected by my questions, which were geared more towards discussing the social, rather than the personal, aspects of the game. Alternately, discussing the social aspects of the game may be easier for some respondents than discussing the more deeply personal aspects, which might reveal personal insecurities. Regardless, I don't believe that the more limited discussion about the personal aspects of the game indicate a lack of importance to members of the culture, but rather indicate the varied nature of that element for players. After all, the personal impact is just one side of the coin—those experiencing positive impacts on their lives through *Magic* in social ways no doubt were affected on a personal level. Following a review of the discussions, I believe that I created a false distinction between the "personal" and "social" aspects that seemingly didn't exist for many of the respondents. For many it seemed as though the effects *Magic* had that were most personally important were the ones that impacted their social life.

Community Through Gaming: *Magic* as a Way to Meet People

As discussed earlier, Putnam (2000) addresses the issue of “social capital” early on in his book “Bowling Alone”, and is careful to elaborate, stating that there are two primary types of social capital. One is “bonding” social capital—an exclusive process designed to reinforce existing bonds, being compared by Putnam to a sort of “sociological superglue”. The other type of social capital is “bridging”, an inclusive process that allows people to expand their social networks, and compared by Putnam to “sociological WD-40” (2000: p.23). Given the overwhelming response to the social elements of *Magic*, I decided to view it as a form of social capital, and explore its effects in the respondents’ lives accordingly. While the vast majority of the respondents discussed the varying ways *Magic* had affected their social lives, their conception or appreciation for these social aspects often differed. However, there was one general theme that was particularly pervasive throughout the interviews: The use of *Magic* as a way to meet new people and make friends.

Even within this common theme, the nature of *Magic* as bridging social capital and its importance in respondents’ lives varied between individuals. This was influenced by a variety of personal factors, including life experiences, the amount that the respondent had invested in the game (both financially and personally), and how seriously they took the game in terms of competitive play versus casual play. A number of the self-styled serious tournament players seemed to enjoy the bridging nature of *Magic*, but did not seem to feel this was the most important part of the game. My very first respondent, Spencer, discussed how he enjoys simply “hanging out casually with like-minded people”, an easygoing attitude that fit his almost automatic inclusion of everyone at the hobby store as a friend.

Manny, another tournament player who enjoyed the competitive aspect of *Magic* as much as the social aspect, stated that he played the game both as a way to meet people and a form of escapism. As with Spencer, he viewed most people in the store as a casual friend, and seemed to enjoy the social

bridging benefits of *Magic* in a breezy, casual fashion. Eric considered himself a very serious tournament player, having one of the most competitive dispositions out of all the respondents. The use of *Magic* as an outlet for that competitiveness, along with the strategy involved, were the most important and rewarding aspects of the game for him. Yet, he stated that the social aspect of the game also mattered, allowing him to network and come into contact with like-minded people he wouldn't have otherwise met at college.

Due to the competitive nature of *Magic*, it is not that surprising that many of the self-styled serious tournament players enjoyed the socially bridging aspects of *Magic*, yet were casual about the interaction provided by the game. By participating in a large number of tournaments, tournament players are those most likely to come into contact with people who may become acquaintances and casual friends without necessarily having the time to develop those friendships into something more substantial. Interestingly enough, the casual enjoyment of social networking provided by *Magic* was not limited to the respondents who put a lot of time in at the store. Those players focusing more on casual play (and thus interacting with new *Magic* players less often) didn't always accord the ability to meet new people very much importance.

Rupert had been playing *Magic* for around three years, having learned from his family and close friends. He mainly viewed the game as a social pastime and healthy outlet for his competitive nature. His attitude towards the game was markedly casual, stating that it wouldn't affect him that badly if every card "spontaneously combusted" (a statement that made me shiver with dread), and he seemed to view the game as simply one social activity among many. However, he did see *Magic* as having a positive impact on his life in several different ways.

If nothing else, [it has resulted in] meeting more people—you know, knowing more people, getting to know—getting to interact outside of a small group. It expands your horizons, I guess [are] the words I'm looking for.

Timothy was another casual player, having only started *Magic* recently (although he did have experience with other collectable card games). He didn't put much time or money into the game, but enjoyed being able to use it as another way to make friends and meet new people during his first year of college.

Some described *Magic* as being a "social outlet" for them. For these respondents, the friends they made (while a positive factor) seemed almost an afterthought. Sam, one of the last people I interviewed, described *Magic* as both a creative and social outlet, allowing him to exercise both aspects when he felt the need. As with Rupert, he seemed to regard the effect the game had on his social life as positive, yet didn't accord it much thought. Both had long histories of friendships involving hobby games, primarily in a casual setting, and both were fairly new to the local tournament scene where they were able to meet new *Magic* players in a brief timeframe. As a result, I don't believe that their casual responses were indicative of a lack of importance to the positive social aspect. Instead, they seemed to mention it almost as an afterthought simply because it is such a fundamental part of the game to them—a theme that other players occasionally echoed.

One such player was Carpenter, who did not spend a lot of time talking about the social aspect of *Magic*. In fact, he only mentioned it once. When asked if *Magic* had affected his life, he stated that "it's gotten me more friends, obviously—a lot of people say that, but, you know, it's true," then moved on to discussing more personal elements of the game. A number of his friends played, and he seemed to have a fairly wide social network of gamer friends, yet he didn't spend a lot of time elaborating on this. It seemed that this wasn't due to his dismissal of the idea that *Magic* influenced his life in a social way, but rather due to an automatic, unthinking assumption that *Magic* was an inherently social activity, and that playing it resulted in making new friends. It seemed as if this was so automatic that it didn't warrant further discussion, and he went on to discuss aspects of the game that he seemed to find more unique to himself, such as his ability to flex his problem-solving skills.

For some, the bridging social capital provided by *Magic* was apparent early in life. Robert referenced his experiences in junior high, echoing adolescent experiences similar to mine. “It’s kind of like, as soon as you started playing *Magic* or whatever, you found all the rest of ‘em—it’s like the nerd force kicked in, you’re like ‘oh there’s another one among us!’” Having been taught *Magic* by a teacher and personal mentor, he went on to found a gaming club which grew to several members, thus expanding his social network with like-minded people with similar interests.

For others, the social advantages of *Magic* weren’t significant until later in life. Carpenter played casually in junior high, but once he got to college began playing more in earnest. This was a similar story to Joshua, who played early in life but took a large break from the game until college. For both players, the social nature of the game mattered a great deal. Joshua specifically mentioned the elements of social interaction and the ability to use games to meet new people as mattering, although these elements took a back seat compared to hanging out with existing gamer friends.

While some respondents were casual about the social opportunities provided by *Magic*, others viewed the bridging social capital provided by *Magic* as profoundly important in their lives. For these respondents, *Magic* wasn’t just a fun social game or a way to casually meet new people (although it also filled those roles). They believed the game had been profoundly positive and instrumental in helping them avoid loneliness and alienation at points during their lives. Daniel was one of the more verbose persons I interviewed, and when asked if *Magic* had a positive, negative, or neutral effect on his life, he primarily discussed the positive social aspects of the game:

I came up here, I didn’t really have any friends ‘cause they all went to different colleges. Um, and I came up here late, actually—it was like my third year in college so I finally came up here and transferred to CMU. And like some of my friends were actually just graduating, so some friends that were up here left, and others just didn’t come with me. So to actually have a place to go and play, like the Hall of Heroes, and to meet all these new people that share the interest—it’s like, well that’s—yeah that’s definitely a positive effect. Because if I’m up here with nobody, and I have these kids over here at the Hall, it’s better than not having anybody.

Interestingly enough, Daniel disclosed that once he'd left his hometown, most of his friends from back home no longer played. As a result, almost everyone he knew that played *Magic* he had met at the Hall of Heroes. As he continued to express the personal importance of the game in his life, he also revealed just how much he valued being able to make new friends so easily.

Martin had similar experiences to Daniel. Notably, Daniel and Martin had very different conceptions of *Magic*, very different backgrounds and introductions into the game, and very different approaches to how to play and the philosophy involved. Yet they both experienced a difficult life change during early adulthood, moving to different cities far away from where they had grown up. Furthermore, Martin didn't attend college and Daniel changed schools halfway through his college career. As a result, both missed out on many of the social advantages that early collegiate life provides. Martin moved as a young adult into a new part of his home state for work, where he didn't know anyone. However, he found people at his work playing a complicated and intriguing card game called *Magic*. They quickly taught him to play, giving him cards and introducing him to the world of hobby games, while providing the beginnings of a social network in his new town. Martin has moved multiple times since then, most recently to the mid-Michigan area, and each time *Magic* has been instrumental in both relieving boredom and making new friends:

[*Magic*] provides entertainment in a city where there's very little entertainment. I mean, you know, I'm not from around here. You know, so it provides me with an easy way to get into a social, uh, social situation where I can meet new people and make new friends also. So it's kinda in a sorta weird way—it's kinda a gateway to other things.

James was heavily involved playing *Magic* during high school, but played almost exclusively with close friends and rarely met people he didn't know through the game. However, this changed for him when he moved across the state after high school, following a girlfriend as she went to college. While he had the social contact of his girlfriend and the friend group she was slowly creating, there was no one he could count as his own friend. He turned to *Magic*, which had previously been something he played within a small social network of close friends, and began playing in local hobby stores. This soon led to

an increase in his social connectivity, an aspect of the game that came up in our discussion more than once. When discussing the role *Magic* had played in his life, James stated:

In the beginning, [*Magic*] was how I met all the people I knew [in my new town]. I mean, it was a really big deal to me, you know? If it wasn't for hobby games I would have, you know—for a year living down there I wouldn't have known anybody.

However, James viewed *Magic* as more than just a way to meet people. Being one of the more serious tournament players at the store, James nevertheless approached the game from a creative and personal standpoint, and had as much to say on the philosophy of *Magic* as he did on the many and varied social aspects of the game. James was one of the most enthusiastic respondents, discussing the multiple ways in which *Magic* had affected his life, and while he talked happily about being able to use *Magic* to make new friends, his real appreciation for the social aspects of the game were much clearer when discussing how they can bring existing friends closer together—or, using Putnam's terms, as bonding social capital.

Community Through Gaming: *Magic* as a Way to Reinforce Friendships

While the ability to meet new people and make new friends is an important benefit from playing the game for many *Magic* players, there are other social benefits as well. A number of respondents viewed the game as a good way to bond with their buddies—or, to use Putnam's terminology, as an important form of social bonding capital. This was less widespread than the use of *Magic* as social bridging. Out of the 22 respondents, eight viewed this as a positive aspect of *Magic* in their lives. As with the use of *Magic* to expand friend groups or meet new people, the use of *Magic* to reinforce existing friend groups took a number of different forms.

While most respondents had met friends through playing *Magic*, not all of them found this element of the game to be of the utmost importance. Peter and Kevin were two such respondents, and mostly used the game as a social pastime amongst existing social groups. Peter plays casually, using the game primarily as an outlet for his creativity and a way to test his intellect against others who pride

themselves on the same things (presumably his friends). He told me that if the game weren't in his life he would miss it, but there were other creative outlets he could use. Peter also believes that *Magic* has had a positive impact on his life, giving him something fun to do with his existing friends and providing a more intellectual form of social activity than television, video games or sports.

Kevin also enjoys the intellectual aspects of the game, playing primarily because it forces him to exercise his critical thinking and problem-solving skills. He indicated that the game is somewhat important to him, but he could live without it, and plays mainly because he enjoys that it gives him something to do with his friends, allowing him to connect with them. Spencer gave similar responses to Kevin and Peter, enjoying the intellectual and strategic aspects of the game. However, he enjoyed both the bridging and bonding aspects of *Magic*, and played with strangers or acquaintances far more than either Kevin or Peter.

As a result of this, Spencer's view of the bonding capital provided by the game was somewhat unique among my respondents. While an outspoken proponent of *Magic's* use as a catalyst to develop new friendships and possessing the automatic assumption that everyone at the store is (on some level) a friend, he acknowledged that playing in public wasn't always without its downsides. When asked about aspects of the game he disliked, Spencer stated:

I guess since you're playing in a public environment [and]—sometimes the more, um—the people that you don't really enjoy being around, but you kinda have to, because it is a public situation. Um, so the guys who are just really irritating to sit next to, are always talking about something that's really strange, or the people who just smell really terrible, and you don't want to be in a ten foot radius.

Due to this, he seemed to particularly value the private, weekly sessions he and his close friends played. He discussed these sessions as positive in his life, and that they gave him something to look forward to. Spencer valued them as a way to escape life and relationship stress, get some space, and relax with the guys. It seemed as if the bridging aspects of *Magic*, while positive in his eyes, also served to highlight the importance of close friendships—friendships that were deepened by their bond through *Magic*.

Spencer wasn't alone in seeing the game as both bonding and bridging capital. In fact, out of those respondents that talked about aspects I considered to represent bonding capital, over half also mentioned an appreciation for aspects of the game I would consider to represent bridging social capital. Of most interest to me was the idea that the bridging social capital of *Magic* could actually *lead* to bonding social capital—something that had happened multiple times in my life. In other words, the ability to meet new people and make casual friends can lead to a deep and important bond, whether that bond is with an individual, or within the context of a certain fan culture or hobby shop.

Two of my respondents talked at some length about both the bonding and bridging aspects of the game, and how these aspects changed and affected their lives. The general idea was that they met people through shared interest or circumstance, in this instance created by the game *Magic*. They developed casual friendships through the interaction provided by playing *Magic*, becoming a part of (or developing) a loose social network. Finally, deeper friendships began to form out of this loose social network, leading to close personal relationships. This is a trend that exists often in online cultures, as discussed by Brooker or Kendall. However, I was intrigued by the idea that a similar thing could occur from face-to-face interaction.

Joshua was one of the most prolific hobby gamers, being involved in a variety of role-playing games, tabletop strategy games, and collectable games (including *Magic*), and is also heavily involved in online gaming communities. He played *Magic* early in life, learning at Boy Scout camp, and then took an extended break until college. Of all the respondents, his wide-ranging variety of hobby activities most closely matched mine (although our attitudes towards the game and personal history with *Magic* differed at some points). Joshua enjoys the social aspect of all hobby games, stating that he'd met lots of people through *Magic*, *Dungeons and Dragons*, or an activity called live action role-playing (or LARPing for short). Hobby games are a huge part of his life and his main pastime, and their influence seemed clear as he discussed his love of role-playing games, their creative outlet, and the ability to

escape the mundane world through shared fantasy. Yet, with his vast experience in the wide world of hobby gaming, he made specific mention of the social aspects of *Magic*:

Hobby gaming in general, I'd say, has definitely impacted my life. I've met a lot of people through hobby gaming, a lot of my current friends I've met through either *Magic* or *Dungeons and Dragons* or LARPing, which is live action role-play; *Magic* specifically has given me several close friends . . . [I] went to [one of their] weddings not too long ago, and hang out with them a lot.

Joshua also seemed to enjoy *Magic* not just because of the social aspects, but due to some of the game's limitations as well. To someone outside the hobby gaming world that may seem a strange idea, but the personal depths of shared fantasy and the amount of time, energy and personal identity that some people invest into these games can lead to some extreme clashes of personality and ideology. *Magic* often seems to avoid this problem. The structure of the game itself may be responsible for this. As a collectable game with an emphasis on physical product (instead of imaginary avatars of one's own personality, as with RPGs) there may be less investment of self, and as such less cause for argument or conflict. When asked about his least favorite aspects of hobby gaming and *Magic*, Joshua had a lot to say:

Umm, [my least favorite part is] the drama. Not so much *Magic* specifically, because the drama is kinda limited to maybe certain players you don't like going up against, or bad matches you've had, instances where people have thrown cards into trash bins because they are so upset . . . LARPing [live action role-playing] specifically has had a lot of drama, and—umm—and we have a list that we post stuff on that most of the people that play in this region read. And I had one instance where someone asked an opinion about what I thought about people outside of our region determining what games we play. And you know, I posted my opinion, and it wasn't too radical, but I said, you know, this is my opinion, take it as you will, you know. But it turned into a big drama thing where I was attacked on these email forums for my opinion. And it's been a lot of drama and a lot of favoritism, specifically in LARP. I don't find that so much with *Magic* and other hobby games, which is probably why I'm moving more towards that now.

He acknowledged that *Magic* could (and sometimes does) have its dramatic moments. However, he seemed to think they were far less frequent and personally damaging than those of his LARPing experiences. Joshua's personal ideologies came under severe and direct attack from people he was ostensibly friends with, placing him on the outskirts of a social group simply for voicing an opinion. He

didn't experience this at any level with *Magic* or other hobby games and this seemed to highlight for him the importance of *Magic*, not just as a way to meet people, but also as a way to develop friendships with people he could trust.

John was one of the most frequent "faces" at the store, and had one of the most reputable reservoirs of knowledge of *Magic's* arcane and often contradictory rules. John had a very specific social timeline for *Magic*. He played some *Magic* in high school, but began playing more ardently when he attended college. He began going to the Hall of Heroes sometime after starting college, and made a lot of friends there. Over time these developed into close friendships, eventually growing to relationships that existed outside of the hobby store. Over time, *Magic* became a sort of measuring stick for the quality of his relationships, and while he didn't elucidate exactly what he meant by this, John made a point of mentioning how hobby gaming helped him realize who his close, reliable friends were.

Not everyone felt that *Magic* had the potential to help them create or develop new friendships. Of all my respondents, two seemed to view the game negatively. One of these was Chester, a young man for whom the social costs of playing far outweighed the benefits. While never citing a specific instance, his constant worry was that his involvement with *Magic* would—or had—cost him potential friends and romantic partners. Viewing the respect of others highly, he seemed concerned that people who don't understand or are unfamiliar with *Magic* would never be able to understand why someone would play the game. More than anyone, he seemed concerned with the low levels of cultural visibility, understanding, and acceptance of hobby gaming. As a result, he hid his involvement with skill and fervor, even at the hobby store. While playing in a small tournament, he seemed withdrawn and unwilling to get close with any of the other players.

In spite of this he noted some positive social benefit, stating that it was a comfort to have something in common with those friends involved. The great fear for him seemed to be the perception

of others based on his playing *Magic*, but within a group of existing friends, he seemed able to enjoy the game:

When you find people that, um—when you find people that are actually—uh, you know playing with you, whatnot, you can converse that way, you can talk about—I mean, if nothing else, that is a social glue that keeps the cabal together. If we don't agree on anything else, there's at least the cards. And that's kinda cool.

In spite of these benefits, however, the overall social cost of the game proved too much for his comfort. Chester's view of *Magic* and the effects the game has had on his social life is discussed later in more detail.

One may wonder why anybody would play a game that they are embarrassed of or feel has had a negative impact on their lives. I certainly did, although at no point did I bring this up. Chester addressed this at one point, likening *Magic* to an addiction (and himself to an addict). In doing so he added another pejorative label to the game and those who play it (including himself). Yet he enjoyed some of the social aspects, and certainly liked that it provided a more interactive escape than TV or sports—other male activities that may be avenues for social interaction. One of the more interesting elements he enjoyed about the game was his main reason for playing. Chester likened *Magic* to lucid dreaming, stating that

I'd say it's the equivalent of being able to control your dreams, so to speak. Like, when you go to sleep, if you can control what you're dreaming about, you can experience something that you normally wouldn't get to experience in real life. Um, and that's a way to broaden perspectives and broaden horizons. I think with *Magic* it's similar.

Without realizing it, Chester had discussed the notion of shared fantasy, one of the main elements of role-playing games. The shared fantasy experience is an extremely personal one, and for most people it seems to be a minor aspect of *Magic*, yet this was not the case here. In many ways he seemed to view *Magic* the way other people view role-playing games, which—due to the high importance placed on the unique shared fantasy of the individual group—are excellent methods of social bonding. Appendix A provides a detailed account of the shared fantasy experience and its relation to social bonding.

While Chester felt some connection to his friend through the game, it was clear that he felt little (if any) connection to the wider social world of *Magic* players. This was apparent both through our discussion and his attitude and actions at the Hall. Conversely, the discussion of bonding through *Magic* seemed to highlight the sense of community many of those I interviewed felt because of the game. Said John:

I just love the chance to hang out with my close friends. Like, um, a couple of my friends that live in like Lansing and Grand Rapids now, when we get together mostly what we do is play games and watch movies. But, you know, games is the big thing because that's still something that, you know, binds us together . . . it really lifts your spirits and makes you realize that, you know, that you're part of a community that's really about just having fun and enjoying these games and life in general.

The notion of community was important for other respondents too. One in particular, James, seemed to regard the fraternity of those who play as a key aspect of the game.

He asserted throughout the interview that *Magic* played an extremely important role in his life in a number of ways, but that this role had evolved over the years. In his high school years, hobby games weren't a path towards new friendships, but rather, a way to solidify existing friendships: Being heavily involved in a number of activities, including wrestling, rock bands, and social groups based around partying, James needed little in the way of social bridging capital. Instead, hobby games (and *Magic* in particular) were something done within his primary social groups, and were a way to foster and create trust amongst people with like-minded interests. James stated that in high school:

Music was a big thing to me, more so than even hobby games were—um, hobby games came in, like sometimes—if I started hanging out with a new group of friends, most of those guys they'd never hear of it, but then slowly it would creep in, and you're like 'hey, check this out', and they're like 'hey, that's cool!'.

James described how sometimes these friendships would grow, particularly those involving *Magic*.

Aside from common factors such as partying and music, *Magic* seemed to provide a unique method of social cohesion, one that he had not experienced prior. He stated that "it was like a bonding thing, I guess? You know, like the kids I played *Magic* with, it's a whole different relationship than with the kids

I knew from school. Like those were like—those people knew my dark secret, type of thing, you know?” His early experiences with *Magic* weren’t about making new friends, but rather about bringing existing friends closer together.

James’ conception of the game and his perception of the game as a social mechanism would change during the course of his life. He had a profoundly positive experience with *Magic* as a tool for social bridging in his late teens, changing forever his view of the game and its role in his life. As this happened, it seemed as though the notions of *Magic* as a form of bonding capital continued to affect his views. As a result, he views the *Magic* world as a close-knit fraternal environment—albeit one that rapidly and easily includes others:

This should be a brotherhood, not a competition. Like, yes, we play competitively—yes we do, it’s because we’re testing our skill, it’s just like, you know, a fencer would test his skill. You’re not really gonna kill your opponent, but you want to really test your skill, and see who developed their skill better, and see who—you know, who’s a better fighter, who’s a better deck builder, you know? It’s part of playing a competitive game, to play against someone and to be competitive. But that’s not the heart of what we do. *Like, we’re not sitting in a room full of people so that we can put someone else down. We’re doing it so that we’re sitting in a room full of people. So we’re hanging out, we’re having fun, you know? Like, if I was mad from playing this, I wouldn’t come back here. You know? Like that’s it.*

He felt strongly that the competitive nature of *Magic* is a fundamental aspect of the interaction it provides. However, he makes sure to point out his belief that the competitive nature of *Magic* should never, ever get in the way of the “brotherhood” formed through a shared love of hobby gaming. In doing so, he indicated that—while at heart a competitive game—the social sense of brotherhood he felt from playing was far more important than winning a game of cards.

The notion of *Magic* as a brotherhood seemed to be a theme represented in many of my interviews to varying degrees, and anyone that had positive experiences with the game both in small-group settings and as a tool for social bridging seemed to at least reference this idea. I found this intriguing on a personal level, and it must be said that my views towards the game and its social nature

are very similar to those of James. However, the idea of *Magic* as a brotherhood was not limited to a metaphoric social sense, and over the course of my discussions, I found that this idea existed in a much more tangible fashion.

The Brotherhood of *Magic*

Another common factor amongst the persons I interviewed was their introduction into the world of hobby gaming. *Magic* served as the introduction to hobby games for almost everyone I talked with, and was the primary hobby game that most of the respondents played. That most people I interviewed began hobby gaming through *Magic* is no doubt of some significance, and speaks to both the widespread popularity of the game and the ease with which it can initially be learned. More important than this, however, are the patterns that emerged indicating *how* each person learned *Magic*—and who they learned it from. All but two of my respondents were taught by people they knew. Furthermore, of the two that didn't, both saw a group of people playing and simply asked these strangers if they would introduce them to the game. That these individuals were able to interact with a group of strangers and make fast friends with them through the learning and shared enjoyment of the game is itself interesting, signifying once again *Magic's* strength as a tool for social bridging.

Most of the respondents learned how to play *Magic* from their friends or friends of friends. Out of all the common factors, this one was by far the most ubiquitous—almost every respondent learned from friends or family. While the vast majority of people interviewed began playing *Magic* after being introduced to it by friends or acquaintances, I noticed fairly quickly another underlying theme that I hadn't thought about. The fact that people learn from existing social groups in their lives was an important theme. However, the existing relationship between the respondent and the person who taught them was also important. Of particular interest were both the type of person that learned the game and the type of person that taught the game. Every single one of my respondents was male and

every person discussed as directly influential in the teaching of the game was male. Within the group of respondents I interviewed, it seems as though *Magic* is an incredibly gendered experience.

I found that not only did people learn from their friends, but many of them learned from people in their lives who I consider to be “older brother” figures. These varied from older friends, the older brothers of friends, older cousins, or paternal figures. While not older brothers in the strictest sense of the word, these older boys and men nevertheless provided for many a form of mentoring that I consider fraternal in nature. Over a third of all the respondents interviewed stated explicitly that they learned the game from an older brother figure. Moreover, all of these respondents learned at some point during their adolescence. Two of the respondents learned not from brother figures but directly from father figures—one from a teacher he was close with, and one from his own father. The patterns emerging from the experiences of those interviewed, as well as the behavior I observed many of those same respondents engaging in, seems to indicate some interesting ideas about the meaning behind the simple act of teaching and learning *Magic*. For many of my respondents, it appears that that the playing and teaching of *Magic* was an alternative form of gender socialization.

Magic as a form of gender socialization is evidenced in many aspects of the ways in which respondents learned the game and the roles those people played in their lives. For those uninterested in or denied access to more “traditional” masculine activities, *Magic* may be seen as providing an alternate form of masculinity-based socialization. The world of hobby gaming (and *Magic* in particular) is certainly male-dominated, and the complexity of both the game and the subculture involved requires a great deal of socialization for successful entry.

The older brother figures fulfilled many roles in the respondents’ lives, sometimes being directly related to them. Daniel learned the game from his older cousin, who introduced him not only into *Magic* but the wide world of fantasy nerddom as well. William had an older cousin close to his age who taught him to play after buying cards. Charles’ cousins were 8 or 9 years older than him, but still happily

taught him the game. Interestingly, all three respondents learned the game between 6th and 9th grade, a time of life when adolescent males often look to older male figures for guidance and influence. During this time, such figures may be particularly important in the socialization of gender identity (Henslin, 2009: p.70).

Rupert learned how to play *Magic* from his older brother-in-law while in high school. He didn't play much at school, however, instead playing with other family members at family functions. He wasn't the only respondent for whom *Magic* became a part of family life. Kevin learned from his father, and played with him and his friends. This relationship was obviously more paternal than fraternal, but I believe the idea of multiple surrogate uncles influencing and affecting a young gamer is parallel to that of big brother figures doing the same thing. Sam also had a paternal figure introduce the game to him, learning from his high school teacher and mentor. His relationship with this teacher was very close, influencing him not only to start playing *Magic* but also to begin a career teaching high school. For these members, the socialization of *Magic* took on a distinctly paternal bent, as father figures taught the game to young men—instilling in them not just rules for playing the game, but also a sense of gendered identity.

Other respondents were not directly related to the fraternal figures that taught them the game, but this didn't decrease the significance of the relationship. Indeed, the idea of fictive kin as being important in our lives is well-established in anthropological circles. James was close with his older sister who had numerous friends. Treating him as a surrogate little brother, her male friends introduced the game to him during junior high school. John had a friend whose older brother taught them how to play, and Chester, upon making new friends in a new neighborhood, was taught the game by one of the kids' older brother. The socialization of *Magic*, then, was not limited to family. Indeed, for those lacking older brother figures, it appeared as though *Magic* was often taught to them by peers who had learned from older brother figures.

Each of these respondents learned the basic rules of the game from an older brother or father figure. However, they also learned a variety of information associated with the game. Overwhelmingly, those learning the game saw those playing the game as males, indicating clearly *Magic's* position as a male-gendered activity. The perspective of *Magic* as a male-centered activity can become so deeply ingrained and automatic that it may not even be considered or discussed by those involved. It was such an automatic assumption amongst my research respondents that at no point did anyone in any of the interviews mention the gendered aspect of the game. Perhaps even more surprising was the fact that I myself did not consider this during any point of my exploration into the subculture. *Magic* as a male-centered activity was such a given that it merited no initial discussion, and it was not until I'd discussed my findings with my advisors that this gaping hole in my exploration of the fan culture had been pointed out to me.

Once established as a gendered activity, *Magic* can also be seen as a form of alternate gender socialization. Along with learning the basics of a game (something that can be seen as an individual experience), the social and competitive nature of *Magic* carries with it further implications. While being taught *Magic* one doesn't simply learn how the game works, but also how to appropriately interact with other players, how best to play the game, and the values inherent in a competitive gaming environment, such as the "spirit of competition" and aggression. Furthermore, the severely gendered nature of the game may reinforce these ideas of competition and aggression as being fundamentally masculine, something that seems to match with much of the gendered behavior in American media (Henslin, 2009: p.71).

Magic is an incredibly complex game, and one's experience with it is not necessarily limited to competition or social interaction. Ricky discussed the social aspects of *Magic* little, preferring instead the creative and mental challenges it provided. However, he mentioned the social aspect of the game

specifically with regard to how he learned it (and indeed was the only respondent to do so). When asked how he was introduced to the game, Ricky mentioned that:

I had a friend of mine . . . who was, uh—it was like him, and both of his brothers . . . they played, and it's kinda like the social thing of, you know, the older brother, who is a few years older, and you're all in high school, and it's like 'wow, you're a college kid, and you play *Magic*? That looks like fun, I gotta learn that too!

In many ways, this seemed to mirror the motivations and reactions of the other respondents who learned from big brother figures—and certainly mirrored my reaction as a young adolescent. For Ricky, the creative and intellectual aspects of the game were the most important, and seem to have been influenced at least in part by his experience learning the game. The socialization of *Magic*, then, isn't simply about masculine competitiveness, but also may involve passing along values such as individuality, creativity, problem-solving skills, task-orientation, and innovation.

The introduction of *Magic* to younger boys from older brother figures is a phenomenon I have seen multiple times and experienced from both ends. I myself was taught and socialized into nerd culture by a friend's older brother. In turn, I have taught many others how to play (and perhaps engaged in gendered socialization), and while resisting my nerd influence for years, I finally taught my younger brother how to play *Magic* and *Warhammer* in the fall of 2009. The first person I ever taught *Magic* to, a close friend that I still play with on a weekly basis, has taught more people to play than anyone I know except myself. His most recent inductions into the world of *Magic* have been his fiancée's adolescent nephews, introducing them to the game, teaching them how to play, and giving them cards in much the same way that I taught him 16 years ago. By teaching younger family members these games, we were not simply passing along masculine ideals of competitiveness, individual identity or the construction of self, but also socializing them into a specific subculture. In doing so, we passed on values of social interaction, and taught them social skills utilized beyond playing the game—such as how to interact with people outside of a game, how to trade for cards, and how to behave within the

subculture. Indeed, my brother had been around and close to hobby game culture his whole life, but only became a part of it once he voluntarily underwent the socialization required to learn *Magic*.

This trend is not one that has not been limited to family or existing surrogate little brothers, and often hobby stores serve as a location for the education and socialization of young nerds. At every hobby store I have ever frequented similar stories of induction into the subculture of collectable gaming have played out, and the Hall of Heroes was no different. During my weeks interviewing I saw various stages of this phenomenon. One eager 15 year old was frequently given rides to the store from friends in their mid-20's (including me on one occasion), and had become a staple member of a loose friend group made up primarily of people a decade older than him.

Older members of the store (particularly James and John) tutored him in the game, shared extra cards, and made sure he didn't get picked on by those few less socially minded players who frequented the Hall. In doing so, they taught him the value of winning, as well as the best routes through which to go about winning. His introduction into the world of *Magic* was a gendered one, with no regular female players at the store, and as such the notions of American masculine competitiveness may have been reinforced. Furthermore, by protecting him from bullies, James and John may have helped him guard and retain his fledgling sense of masculinity. More importantly, he became an important member of the social group, being more than just a mascot or little brother. In a very real sense, *Magic* provided a path to a masculine identity that may have been difficult to find elsewhere.

The youngest person I encountered at the Hall was a tenacious 12 year old, who many of the most aggressive and successful tournament players treated like a little brother. This young man would get dropped off by his mother on tournament days and was left "alone" at the store for a good four hours. To those unfamiliar with the social nature of the Hall this may seem like bad parenting, but Mike (the store owner) had long established trust with the mother. James made a point of "looking after" this young man, and over the course of a few months had helped the young man in question turn a motley

collection of random cards bought with spare pocket change into an efficient, well-constructed deck that he was quite proficient with. This young, impressionable almost-adolescent seemed to take the “masculine” elements of the game to heart, playing with shameless bravado and bluster in an over-the-top imitation of the more successful players.

The socializing elements of *Magic* do not seem to be limited to a paternal or fraternal relationship. As with many young men and adolescents, the youngest player being tutored by older players had started by simply showing up at the store once in a while, buying individual cards or the occasional pack and hanging around the older players. Soon enough, the older members of the fan culture engage the younger ones in conversation, then play with them, then help them improve their game, and so forth—and in almost all instances where I’ve seen this happen, as the kid became more a part of the group, they began bringing friends their own age to the store, further expanding the community.

While this pattern of gendered socialization in *Magic* is interesting, one might question what this indicates. In order to see the importance this holds, I looked at some of the overall patterns that emerged among my respondents. James and John discussed in detail how teaching the game to their friends was an important part of the *Magic* experience, and both learned from older brother figures. It is no accident that these were also two of the players at Hall of Heroes most involved in the tutoring, teaching and mentoring of young adolescent *Magic* players. James’ approach tended towards an inclusive, friendly attitude, encouraging free play and treating the kids as peers; John tended to be perceived as distant initially, but was always ready with free cards, deckbuilding tips, and friendly advice.

Might these experiences indicate that, for many, *Magic* is a grassroots phenomenon, spreading primarily through friend groups and circles of acquaintances? Every one of my respondents except one was introduced into both *Magic* and the hobby gaming world through some form of socialization. In many instances this socialization was fraternal or paternal, but for others it was simply part of a wider

trend of peer socialization. Perhaps it is the social nature of the game that leads people to find more players, or perhaps it is simply rooted in the desire to share an enjoyable activity. Regardless, the argument can be made that for many, once all available friends (or interested friends) have been introduced to the game, older players often turn to other, less close friends—perhaps friends of friends, or perhaps younger brother figures in their lives.

The Hobby Store as a Social Location

The notion of *Magic* as a grassroots phenomenon was one I had not considered, and one that came as an unexpected and pleasing surprise. However, not all of the surprises following my discussions were so enjoyable. Upon reviewing my discussions, I found that my methods of qualitative research often left something to be desired and a number of questions—phrased as they were—attempted to wring qualitative responses using quantitative questions. As a result of this incongruence, some questions elicited confusion. The question, “what percentage of your friends play *Magic* or are involved in hobby games?”, was often met with confused looks or blank stares. Sometimes, as with Manny, the respondent would try to quantify the percentage but be unable to do this. Conversely, some respondents were able to give me an exact number of their friends, but did then did not provide the larger social framework these friends existed in (interview questions can be found in Appendix D).

I believe this question was ineffective for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that the idea of friendship is an inherently personal one. By asking what percentage of friends played hobby games, I was asking the interviewee to not only reveal personal information about their social lives but also to decide on the fly which of the people they were involved with they considered to be friends and who were simply acquaintances without providing a frame of reference for either. Furthermore, I did little in the way of follow-up questioning, short of trying to get them to differentiate between “close, personal” friends and “casual” friends.

In spite of my occasional failings as a qualitative researcher all was not lost, and even considering its weaknesses this question brought up some interesting points that I hadn't previously considered. First, it differentiated the people on each end of the *Magic* social spectrum—those who have almost no friends that play *Magic*, and those whose entire friend circles are based around *Magic* or hobby games. At times, this helped me ascertain how seriously the respondent viewed *Magic*, especially for those few respondents who were reticent to talk. More important, however, was the way this question showcased the role of the hobby store within the fan culture of *Magic* card players.

Something I hadn't considered while interviewing fellow *Magic* players was just how significant the hobby store itself and the casual, loose subculture based around a store could be. A number of respondents, when asked about friends who played *Magic*, gave an indication that everyone at the hobby store sharing their hobby was (on some level) a friend. What is most interesting about this is the fact that it was rarely discussed in depth. Rather, for many of the respondents, there was a simple assumption this was the case. When I asked Spencer this question, he simply stopped and looked around as if to count the number of heads in the room (at the time, about 15-20 people). Laughing and misunderstanding the significance of his gesture, I rephrased by asking him what percentage (over half, he decided), a figure that—without any context—told me very little indeed.

Manny was flummoxed by the same question, eventually settling on “about 1/8th” of his friends playing hobby games. But before he tried to add and divide the number of friends in his life, he stopped and clarified, asking “you mean not counting here?” Rupert asked me point blank how I qualified friends, a statement I wish I had paid more attention to. In the end he settled on about 20, plus everyone at the store. By the time I'd gotten to William (about a third of the way through my interviews), I was asking for both casual group friends and close personal friends. His close friends numbered about a dozen, and casual friends included everyone at the Hall of Heroes.

Many more didn't even make mention of the store, instead only discussing friends outside of the Hall of Heroes. Yet these respondents almost always were friendly with other people at the store, and spent most of their time between games in small groups of two or more people. Out of everyone I talked with, only one respondent—Chester—kept his distance from other *Magic* players, both before and after games. While these responses did, more than anything, indicate the varied and personal definition of “friendship”, an underlying response is often evident: the idea that most people at the hobby store are either friends, acquaintances, or potential friends. Those that aren't may be rivals of some form or another—whether it be in the traditional sense of competitive rivalry, as represented by a desire to win or a clash of assumptions about what the game itself is and how it should be played, or on a more personal level, as evidenced by the discomfort some players exhibited around others.

In many ways, I believe that this indicates the importance of the hobby store to hobby fan cultures. Furthermore, it showcases an important aspect of *Magic* groups that differentiate them from other fan cultures. Many fan cultures exist both in a broad social sense and a small group sense. In other words, there is a small primary group of friends that are involved in the hobby/fandom, and a larger secondary group with whom they have something in common. One good example of this is exemplified in Brooker's “Using the Force” (2002). Brooker discussed fandom as pertaining to both aspects. He interacted with small, individual friendship-based groups, gaining an understanding of how both *Star Wars* and the groups of friends based around *Star Wars* affects the lives of those involved. He also interacted with the larger fan culture, using internet message boards to find small groups, gaining an understanding of the biggest “factions” within the greater subculture of fandom, and discussing large fan events where hundreds or thousands of fans gather (2000: p.21). However, for many of these groups the individual friendship cultures based around a particular cultural text is often isolated in a physical-social sense from other fan groups. While they will occasionally interact within these larger secondary social fan networks at conventions and events, these events are nevertheless largely made up

of individual fans or small fan groups all thrown together. Furthermore, there are few dedicated *Star Wars* stores, and those stores that do specialize in *Star Wars* memorabilia and hobby games are in fact often hobby stores.

Similar experiences may be had by hobby gamers and *Magic* players, either at large hobby conventions such as GenCon (hosted annually in Indianapolis with over 40,000 attendees each year) or large-scale tournaments such as Pro Tour Qualifiers or release events. Yet, while these experiences are an important part of many people's social identity and fan culture, they do not necessarily represent an avenue through which the fans may expand their social capital. Most often these conventions are held in large cities, with people coming from around the region—or, in some cases, from around the country or the world—to participate. While one may meet new people or make new friends, the likelihood that those people will be from one's own area and become a permanent part of one's social circle is small.

It seems that for many fan cultures, there are (in general) two types of groups: The small, primary fan groups people make out of their friends, relatives, and the occasional stranger; and the larger, secondary group, representing the greater population of the fandom (most often embodied at a variety of conventions, meetings, viewings or tournaments across the country). This isn't to say that there is no communication between primary fan groups. In fact, quite the opposite is true, and it could easily be argued that online representation of fan culture has grown to such an extent that this itself is the best definer of "fan culture". In "Using the Force" (2002), Brooker discusses the importance of online culture with various groups; and in the article "Oh No! I'm a Nerd!" (2000), Kendall provides an interesting and early look at online fan culture and the very real effect it can have on people's lives.

While this online communication can be significant, there are many sources that indicate that it is less significant than face-to-face communication. In "The Ties that Bind are Fraying" (2008), McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears discuss the weakening effects of media communication, and in "Bowling Alone" (2000), Putnam discusses that while online communication may provide a wider social

network, it doesn't necessarily represent a deeper one. I disagree with the rather severe idea that these online communities have little to no significance. However, I do believe that in cultures where face-to-face interaction is important (such as hobby fan culture or primary friendship groups), new members must be included in order for the group to grow, expand, and survive. Inevitably a primary group shifts and changes and this is certainly true of friendship groups. Without an influx, the friends eventually disappear, move on, get married, and move out of the circle. Furthermore, if the group remains a bonded group set in its ways, introducing new members to the group may become more difficult.

Having discussed the nature of *Magic*, social life, and friendship with over twenty respondents, I have come to the conclusion that the hobby store itself plays a far more important role for many fan cultures than I had originally surmised. In one way, the store itself provides an important link between small friend groups and the larger cultural gatherings. Furthermore, it facilitates interaction between individuals and groups of friends, acting as a bridge for multiple social groups. For many, especially those new to the hobby or new to an area, it becomes the very focus of the friend group itself. John developed some of the most important friendships and relationships of his life through the local hobby store, and James was able to make new friends and feel socially connected in a new city. Perhaps most importantly, the hobby store provides a sanctioned, accepted setting for the game—a place where fans can be at ease with themselves and those around them. It may be this more than anything that facilitates both the bridging and bonding aspects of *Magic*.

The Cost of Playing *Magic*

It should be noted that I'm discussing these elements of the game and their impact on respondent's lives in terms of social capital because it is both convenient and applicable. I must also point out that it is totally possible for someone to feel a part of "*Magic* community" and not talk about either bridging or bonding, nor spend very much time at the store at all. One can simply view the social

aspects of the game as less important than the strategic or more game-oriented aspects of *Magic*, but still take part in activities typically cast as fan related. Yet, I found that those respondents who discussed aspects of the game related to bridging or bonding social capital—or, more often both—were the ones who were most likely to refer to *Magic* as being part of a community, and were overwhelmingly the respondents who had the most number of positive things to say about *Magic*.

However, not every reaction to *Magic* was positive. Another unexpected turn for me was the similarities in many of the respondents' responses to the aspects of the game they didn't like. I expected to find that each person's views on the negative impacts of the game would vary. Instead, many of the respondents felt that playing *Magic* carried a cost of some kind. Most often this was described as a financial one, but occasionally these costs were seen as social. However, to simply state that *Magic* carries some form of cost in terms of social capital with more mainstream groups paints an incomplete picture. It would be more accurate to state that while *Magic* and other "nerdy" enterprises might entail the loss of some social capital, the overall benefits tend to outweigh whatever these social costs are perceived to be.

Around half of the respondents stated that financial costs were either their least favorite or among their least favorite aspects. Sometimes this was expressed as a mild complaint that playing competitively could get a little pricey—the secondary market for *Magic* cards is huge, and individual cards much sought after by competitive tournament players can go for upwards of \$50 each. Manny, a good-natured fellow through and through, grinned and shrugged at this question, then stated that not having the money to get the cards he wants is a little frustrating. Others experienced it far more keenly, with Martin claiming that the game feels like a drain on his resources most of the time.

Some respondents viewed the cost of the game more philosophically. Bronson acknowledged that the monetary cost could be an issue, yet there were caveats to this downside:

Um, the money sucks. It's not a cheap thing to get into. If you're smart about it, you don't have to spend a lot of money to enjoy these things. But, um, sometimes I end up spending more than

I'd like to. Never so much that I'm broke, but I'm like oh man, I probably could have done something else with that money—I regret it. Like I'll periodically regret it—but I never really do. Um, so that does kinda suck—but you know, paying for anything sucks.

When asked about why he plays and what it provides, he discussed the sense of satisfaction he gets from the game:

I can sit and play a video game—or, I can take that \$60 and, you know, put it into cards or figures, you know, like I, uh . . . I rationalize it at the time, because I'm like well I can take this \$60 and spend it on a game that—you know like a video game or something that I can get like a finite amount of time out of it and then be done with it—or I can take that same amount of money and put it into these cards that I can do all kinds of [things with] . . . and so there are those social aspects.

Others discussed the loss of time to the game. John thought that too much time invested in the game can be disruptive to one's life. A few other respondents mentioned this to some extent and some, like John, were merely pressed for time in their lives to begin with, and the addition of a somewhat time-consuming hobby created occasional role strain. Others felt it was a greater issue. Grover was actually getting out of the game, and I was able to catch him during what he claimed was one of his last tournaments as he tried to sell his collection of cards. When asked if he ever felt there were negative impacts on his social life due to *Magic* he immediately said yes:

I definitely would, you know, categorize it as very disrupting . . . you know, there were family activities but I'd be, you know, with my cards, or I'd be with other people with my cards—not true friends, but people that just play, and, you know, I lost a whole lot of friends that way, a whole lot of family memories and stuff that way.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming response was that in spite of the costs—whether they were social, financial, or personal—the enjoyment and social interaction derived from the game made playing worthwhile. Yet this wasn't always the case. There were two respondents who (while not having a totally negative view of the game or their experiences with it) felt that *Magic's* influence in their lives was neutral at best. Grover was one of these, and stated that the game's good parts and bad parts combined left him feeling neutral about it. Chester, on the other hand, had strongly negative things to

say about the game. While he intended to keep playing *Magic*, he did so primarily in private. When he did go to play in public, he kept his distance from the other players at the store. Furthermore, he described the cost of *Magic* as very real and very painful—both in financial and social capital.

Deviant Case Analysis: *Magic* as an Alienating Influence

For all its positive social interactions and the inherent fun in playing *Magic*, respondents made it clear that heavy involvement in the game was not without its disadvantages. For most respondents these “costs”, be they in social or financial capital, were worth it. Yet, this was not the case for everyone, particularly Chester. Chester surprised me in a number of ways, not the least of which was that he even played *Magic* to begin with. I had never formally met him or spoken to him, but we had been at a couple of the same parties and he had dated one of my girlfriend’s friends for years and was a fringe member of her social group. But up until I saw him enter the store I didn’t think we had anything in common and I had never even had a conversation with him.

I was intrigued by the fact that Chester was a *Magic* player. I normally have a nose for these things, and even my girlfriend at the time (who made it her business to know as much as possible about as many people as possible) didn’t know he played. Unlike many of my other respondents, most of whom seemed to feel at home at the Hall of Heroes, Chester was uncomfortable from the moment he entered the store until the moment he left. Over the course of the evening, in which we both played in an eight-man tournament, he interacted only with Michael the storekeeper, myself, and whoever he was currently playing a game with. He seemed almost embarrassed or ashamed to be there, and kept his distance from the other players as much as possible. While other people would chat about cards, decks or non-*Magic* talk, Chester tended to sit by himself at a table and sort through his cards in between rounds. In spite of this, he was eager to talk when he recognized me. It turned out that he came to the store infrequently, and never often enough to become a part of the group.

I had initially interpreted Chester's distance as shyness, but this didn't match with what I had heard of him. However, his reticence to interact with other players made more sense once I had interviewed him. While most respondents discussed the social aspects of *Magic* in a positive light, Chester felt differently:

I think that, um, socially it's constraining—like, if I were to, uh, try to explain to people my interests, I find that it's in my best interests not to reveal that part of myself. Um, that's something that I kinda keep private, or keep within the cabal of people who play. Um, I notice that's a behavior, uh, not just isolated to myself.

Chester seemed to feel that knowledge of *Magic* would severely deplete his overall social capital. This was in stark contrast to most other respondents, many of whom considered *Magic* fandom to be a point of pride. Daniel in particular talked about “owning the game”, and making it a part of one's personality regardless of what others thought.

Chester viewed *Magic* from the opposite end of the spectrum, seeing it as a potential threat to his social well-being and not a benefit. It was clearly something that he felt self-conscious about, and this perhaps explains his unwillingness to participate socially at the store, instead focusing only on the game. He was enormously concerned with the perception other people had of his involvement with *Magic*. Yet, by his admission, it hadn't actually been a factor in his life. Indeed, it seemed as though his fears were purely hypothetical. When asked what his least favorite aspect of the game was, he had much to say:

I think it's a tie between the social and financial costs. Yeah, I think it's a dead-end tie on that. Like I've mentioned before, the social costs are, when you bring something like that up, the majority of people number one don't understand what *Magic* is, don't understand what a collectable card game is, probably don't understand the purpose of spending money on a game altogether. So, the fact that you're several layers down in the understanding situation—it doesn't help you at all socially to have to explain that constantly to people . . . *I've been blessed in the terms of, I've never been turned down from a girl or whatever because of cards, I've never had friends not associate with me because of cards, um, I've never had that, quite the opposite—but, that being said, I think a lot of friendships or relationships never begin because, if someone may find out about somebody playing cards or things like that.* I think it's a, uh, it almost acts like a barrier sometimes. Like, to some people it might be attractive, to some people it's just neutral, and I find that's the majority—but uh, cause we can never really measure how many are actually turned off from it, or don't even want to talk to you if they find out that you play things

like that. Um, and one could even go so far as to say, uh, somebody who's extremely religious, regardless of which religion it is, any kind of fundamentalist religion definitely would not cater to anything like that, even symbolically.

Chester claimed to never have actually experienced any negative social impact through *Magic*, nor did it seem to impact the way people felt about him. Furthermore, he was an avowed atheist, making his arguments about religion seem out of place. Yet, he worried constantly about the potential cost, assuming that there was some kind of loss on his part due to his involvement with the game. He seemed deeply embarrassed by it on a personal level, and even though he enjoyed aspects of the game, he seemed to be focused not on the social but the individual aspects.

Perhaps this is why Chester kept his distance at the Hall—not just because of the perceived social cost and the possible negative social impact, but also because he approached *Magic* from such an individualistic standpoint. He stated that his favorite aspect of the game was the discipline involved, and he liked the idea of doing his personal best during *Magic* and improving himself, even going so far as to claim that—in a way—he was always playing primarily against himself. However, even Chester didn't play the game alone, and seemed to enjoy some camaraderie with other players during games. Yet by his own admission those he truly enjoyed playing *Magic* with were almost exclusively people he already knew and was comfortable with. Even then, he seemed more concerned with doing his best, excelling in competition, and the personal, creative aspects of the game rather than using the game to develop social capital of any kind.

Nowhere was this better stated than in his comparison between *Magic* and the act of "lucid dreaming". During this part of our discussion, Chester touched on one of the fundamental aspects of shared fantasy involving *Magic*. While in some ways this resembled discussions mirroring the nature of shared fantasy as a vehicle for social bonding capital, it also highlighted his very individual and personal approach to the game. After all, the act of fantastic dreaming is a solitary one.

I would have expected Grover to have had the most negative view of the game as for various reasons, he was getting out of the game (for the most part) and selling his large collection of cards. Yet, while he viewed aspects of the game negatively, particularly with regard to his own inability to manage his time when playing the game, he seemed to have a more neutral opinion of *Magic* than Chester. Unlike Grover, Chester had no intention of getting out of *Magic*, and in fact bought cards and played in a tournament at the Hall of Heroes the same day I interviewed him. I was surprised at his continued involvement in *Magic*, but Chester listed a number of reasons for his enjoyment of the game. These included his private enjoyment of the fantasy elements, the small social satisfaction he occasionally derived from playing, and its use as a “passively active” escape. When pressed as to what this meant, Chester indicated that *Magic* is a hobby one can enjoy by themselves that is more mentally stimulating than television or movies. Yet, none of these benefits seemed to outweigh the negative attributes he attached to the game.

One possible explanation for his continued involvement arose when discussing the various costs of the game. After talking about all the varying reasons why he felt *Magic* hurt him, Chester seemed compelled to defend his involvement to some extent. After discussing both the social negatives and the fiscal costs of the game, he stated that:

There has to be, a, uh, a need—a desire or some sort of payback that we get from buying the cards and using them. So, whatever it is that we’re getting out of them, *whether it’s the same thing as gambling or some sort of addiction*, it’s obviously worth it, because otherwise we’d be putting that money towards more socially acceptable things.

Regardless of his very personal reasons for playing—and I’m still not sure I fully understand what those were—Chester likens his involvement with *Magic* to a gambling addiction. I believe this highlights many of the seemingly self-loathing themes that came up during our discussion. Over the course of our interview and the casual conversation we had later on while playing a game of *Magic*, it became clear that he hadn’t invested a ridiculous amount of money into the game (by typical *Magic* player standards,

at any rate). Yet he seemed to think that any amount was “too much”, and seemed only able to discuss his enjoyment of the game either in a personal fashion or as a negative.

While playing the game for twelve years and enjoying various aspects of it, Chester nevertheless seemed uncomfortable that *Magic* was a part of his life, especially with regards to his social connections. In many ways it seemed as though he was almost a reluctant fan, never willing to embrace his love of the game or let himself be a part of the fan culture. He clearly didn't feel any connection at the store, but that was perpetrated due to his reluctance to engage anyone else in conversation. He struggled with wanting to do better during the tournament, but was unwilling to practice by playing more often. It seemed in many ways that the walls of social distance he felt were created by his own fear of judgment from playing the game, and as a result he never truly felt a part of the culture.

If anything, this highlights for me the importance of the gaming culture. Perhaps if Chester's group of close friends who played was larger or played more often he would feel more connection to other people who play *Magic*. Perhaps if he were able to let down his guard and connect with some of the strangers at the store through *Magic* he would begin to feel a kinship that would dull his sense of shame or fear of ostracism from playing the game. Or perhaps nothing could change his views towards *Magic* or himself, and he would see the game and its effects on his life negatively regardless of situation or circumstance. Either way, Chester helped me understand the role *Magic* can play from a unique perspective, and I was immensely grateful for his willingness to share his experiences with me. Chester demonstrated to me that any social capital to be gained from *Magic* had to be done so willingly. Far from being automatic, this interaction came with a fundamental element: the necessity to make personal choices about one's involvement in the game. Few respondents seemed to feel that *Magic* had impacted them in a real or negative way, but Chester demonstrated that even the fear of social rejection from an association with *Magic* can have an impact on one's self-esteem.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

My exploration into the world of *Magic* fan culture revealed much about the nature of an interesting subculture that I have been a part of for many years. *Magic* fan culture (and possibly hobby game fan culture in general) differs from similar fan cultures in a number of ways. The interaction involved in hobby gaming is an obvious factor, and may be at the root of many of the differences between this and similar types of fan cultures. The high level of interaction required may also contribute to hobby gaming's low levels of cultural visibility and understanding, as it is difficult to simplify many of the key elements (unlike comic book culture, for instance). The extremely single-gendered nature of *Magic* subcultures may be the most striking difference between this and many of the fan cultures reviewed in the literature. As the reasons behind this are beyond the scope of this research, it may necessitate further inquiry. Finally, the role of the hobby store no doubt plays an important factor in both the expansion of existing *Magic* fan culture and provides a setting where bonding between members of the same culture can occur. The hobby store is incredibly important for many gamers, and its existence is a clear and important difference between hobby game fan cultures and film and TV fan cultures.

The interviews seemed to reveal little in the way of agreement between respondents on how *Magic* affected their perceptions of self. This may be due to the personal nature of such inquiries, or may be due to my tendency to lead discussion towards topics involving social interaction instead of personal reflection. In spite of this, a number of those interviewed discussed ways in which *Magic* was personally important, whether it was through helping them gain self-esteem or allowing them to access their creative nature and use the game to express themselves. One respondent, Chester, had substantial negative perceptions of himself due to his involvement with the game. Thus, *Magic* is not a

universally positive influence for everyone involved. Many of Chester's notions of both himself and his involvement with *Magic* seemed to mirror wider negative social perceptions of the game, and may indicate that at least part of his negative self-image was due to social influence. However, almost all the other respondents didn't mention this or brushed it off, indicating that for this group of players, wider issues of social visibility and acceptance mattered little.

My exploration of this group of *Magic* players revealed that the role the game played in their lives was overwhelmingly a social one. Almost everyone discussed the game in terms of playing with others, making new friends, hanging out with existing friends, or using *Magic* as a measuring stick for friendships. Based strictly on my exploration of *Magic* culture, it seems obvious that *Magic* is of far more use as bridging social capital than bonding capital. The ability to make friends with the numerous existing *Magic* players, as well as the grassroots way in which *Magic* is spread, make this an obvious choice. Yet it must be stressed that the very setting within which I chose to conduct the exploration of this culture biases this discussion. One of the main roles of this hobby store was to facilitate interaction between gamers who may or may not know each other. As a result it is natural that those I encountered at the store were far more concerned with this aspect of the game. Were I to utilize Putnam's (2002) methods and interview groups of friends who mostly played within their own social circles, I think the aspects of social bonding created through *Magic* would feature much more prominently.

Ultimately, this indicates that *Magic* can be used for bridging or bonding capital, and is predisposed to allow both to occur. This is one of the most unique factors for the game, being even more flexible as social capital than other hobby games. However, one can choose not to use the game in this way at all—some respondents were more concerned with the personal aspects of the game, and Chester utilized the social capital of *Magic* very little.

Mistakes, Lessons Learned, and Plans for Future Research

I feel positively about most aspects of this thesis. My exploration into the social world of hobby gaming went well, as almost all the people I held discussions with responded very positively, which made the discussion process both enjoyable and enlightening. I was pleased that many ideas I had about the game and its social nature seemed to be held by other players, and I was equally pleased that there were aspects of the game and common experiences between players I hadn't even thought of. I was not entirely satisfied with some aspects of my research process, such as my initial approach to interviewing and some of the questions asked. Yet even the elements that were less effective than I had hoped will inform and improve my methods for future explorations into fan culture.

Were I to conduct similar research in the future I would review each interview recording in detail prior to the next set of discussions, thinking carefully about which questions worked and were pertinent and which questions I needed to change and adjust. I didn't do this at the time for a number of reasons. First, I was very focused on completing the research in the time frame I'd given myself, and as such didn't review my discussions as carefully as I should have. Often, I would do three or four interviews in as many hours, in between which I was playing *Magic*, socializing, and acquainting myself with the store and the people that played there. This gave me little time in between my interviews to review the recordings. I did review all the discussions within a day or two of recording them, but I clearly didn't assess them carefully enough, and often didn't think to compare them to interviews from previous sessions. As a result there were some problem questions that remained in my interviews for far longer than they should have.

Second, while approaching this as a qualitative project (and being a strong believer in qualitative methods), when actually following through with the discussions I often became stuck in a quantitative state of mind. Sometimes I had a feeling my questions weren't working, and I would attempt to change the way they were presented or explain them better. However, I should have changed or altogether

removed at least two questions. At the time, I stayed with these questions because I wanted my interviewees' responses to be "consistent", particularly with regard to the more qualitative aspects of the thesis. For some reason I assumed that this consistency was necessary. I did not make this mistake for most of the questions and for the majority of them, especially the more open-ended ones, I allowed the respondents to simply discuss their own feelings and lives, taking a page from the Chicago methodology of interviewing. These questions were the most telling and informative by far. In retrospect, I realize that I needed to get the overall feel of the importance in these people's lives instead of trying to quantify the unquantifiable. If time had allowed I should have pre-tested the interview schedule with a small set of respondents.

The questions that were least informative were those that attempted to solicit quantitative measures for thoroughly personal and individual aspects of life. When asking how many students played *Magic* in a school and then the size of the school, I intended to garner a representation of how "socially acceptable" the game itself was at the respondent's school. I felt this would be too personal an issue to be discussed directly, and incorrectly believed that I could piece together the information myself. Asking what activities they were involved with in addition to *Magic* also seemed fruitless without the appropriate context, and asking them point blank how many friends they had that played the game simply drew confused looks and equally confused responses. It was clear that in some cases I needed to ask questions more directly (or rely on the person interviewed) to discuss these elements if they felt comfortable), while in other cases I needed to elaborate more clearly what I was really looking for.

The final question was a particularly frustrating example of trying to solicit quantitative information in a small sample qualitative project. I asked how important *Magic* was in the respondent's life, and asked him to quantify it on an arbitrary 1-10 scale—1 being the least important aspect of life and 10 being a very important element. Despite its weaknesses, I would consider keeping a slightly

changed version of this question. The result of asking this question turned out to be different than I originally intended, but nevertheless provided important insight. By asking people to place the importance of *Magic* within the context of their lives, it sometimes revealed final insights into the game and how it influenced and affected them. It was interesting to see someone who had ardently talked about the game for ten minutes straight suddenly act as if it hasn't had much influence on them, and it was equally surprising when, on occasion, a respondent would discuss the game in casual, carefree terms and then label its importance in their life as an eight. By itself this question revealed little, but when looked at in the context of the overall interview it helped me understand each respondent's personal perspective on *Magic*.

Another weak factor in my exploration of hobby game fan culture was a lack of familiarity with the equipment I used. I originally had 23 interviews recorded; however, one of my last interviews was so garbled, warped, and distorted by background noise that I had to discard it. I recorded the interviews on two small digital voice recorders. The first one worked well, but when it filled up (having only so many of hours of recording time) I had to quickly find a replacement. I used a different model voice recorder, not being able to find a copy of the first one. This recorder presented me with a number of problems. Its playback mechanisms were limited, and only one ear of the headphones worked. It picked up the voice of the respondent less well than the first, and did a worse job of filtering background noise. As a result, I lost an entire interview, and two questions from two other interviews were unintelligible. I consider myself lucky in a sense—I could have lost an entire day's worth of interviews instead of just the one. I should have tested the second recorder as extensively as I did the first, and in the future I will not go into the field without knowing exactly how well my equipment will work.

More than anything, these mistakes displayed my inexperience as a qualitative researcher. While being a theoretical adherent of qualitative methods, most of the actual research I had done over the course of my academic career was quantitative in nature, and this no doubt affected my approach.

However, research is a learning experience as much as anything else, and my experiences taught me as much about qualitative methods and my ability as a researcher as they did about the social importance of hobby game subcultures (or lack thereof) in the respondents' lives. For future research, I am going to make a number of adjustments. First, I intend to remove the quantitative elements of the questions I asked. I will replace them with more personal and pertinent questions. For example, instead of asking how many people were in the high school where the respondent learned to play *Magic*, how many people played with them, what activities they took part in, and then attempting to coalesce this into useable data indicating their overall social acceptance, I can simply bring up relevant questions later in the interview when we're more comfortable with each other.

I should also re-work the question "have you ever experienced any negative impact on your social life due to Magic/hobby games?" to be two different questions—one asking about adulthood, and one asking about adolescence. Additionally, I need to let the respondents define certain factors for themselves, such as how they define a "friend". Simply asking for a number of friends provides no useful information (as I discovered). Instead, I should have asked the respondent to describe and discuss their friends and friend groups involved in hobby games. By doing so, and by asking good follow-up questions, I would have been able to get a sense of how important these people and groups are in their lives. I could even ask questions such as "do a lot of your friends play hobby games?", letting the respondent answer for themselves and providing me with a sense of its importance in their subcultures.

There were elements of research performance that I struggled with early in the process. For the first few interviews I was nervous, and forgot a couple questions. There were also some instances where I could have extrapolated more information with a good follow-up question. I chalk these omissions up primarily to inexperience and insecurity, both of which I quickly overcame. By the third interview I had hit my stride, and while I still need to work on my flexibility during the research process, I improved my technique a great deal very quickly. The biggest problem with my interviewing was my

desire to “stick to the script” during the interview process, even though I knew some of my questions weren’t working. I was set on making sure the questions were standard for all the interviews, and attempted to work within the context of these questions. This is an approach I will avoid in the future. For other potential projects I intend to keep my qualitative analysis away from quantitative questions; furthermore, I will more carefully review and test the questions, to ensure that similar information inhibitors don’t impact my research. Through extra preparation, the proper testing of equipment and the lessons learned from my mishaps in this project, my future explorations into the world of fan cultures will be greatly improved.

Conclusion

Overall, I feel extremely positive about this thesis research. I regret a number of the mistakes and errors that I made but even they often helped in my understanding of the fan culture of *Magic* players, and at the very least they made me a better qualitative researcher. I could not have asked for a more receptive group of respondents, and I thoroughly enjoyed every aspect of this project. Gary Allen Fine’s attitude towards the study of leisure cultures certainly makes more sense now; in “Shared Fantasy”, Fine states that:

We who study leisure sociology sometimes feel that the sniping from others may represent jealousy of the enjoyment we gain from our ‘work’; if so, it is probably well placed. It perhaps represents an attempt to equalize research rewards; since we have intrinsic rewards, perhaps, it is said, the external rewards (grants, publications, status in the profession) are less important (1983: p.i).

This project had more benefits than simple enjoyment, being deeply fulfilling in both an intellectual and emotional way.

This thesis represents four years of long (and often sporadic) work. Over the course of it, the focus, ideas, and methods have changed and shifted a great deal from initial conception to the completed product. Through it all, one thing remained constant: my desire to explore and explain the

social world of *Magic: The Gathering*. Hobby gaming has been one of the most powerful, positive, and enduring influences in my life, and I was honored by the opportunity to explore the role it played in the lives of fellow gamers.

I have always felt that playing *Magic* had aided me and other gamers socially, but thanks to Putnam's work (2000) I was able to elaborate on what that meant. *Magic* may represent an important source of bridging and bonding capital to those who choose to involve themselves in the culture, as well as providing a way for players to develop positive self-identity. Yet, one can choose to ignore these aspects, as did Chester, and these are not required to enjoy the game. One of the unique aspects of *Magic* is that, in spite of the deep meaning it has for many people, one can simply enjoy it as nothing more than a fun card game. The social interaction required and facilitated by the game defines the experience for most people involved. As such, even simple elements such as teaching it or playing it can become deeply social experiences that are well worth the cost of admission. However, not everyone feels this way, and there will always be those who wished they had never picked up a deck of *Magic* cards.

For others, the game is simply a fun diversion, and there is nothing wrong with that. But even the most casual players or those that cared least about *Magic* itself discussed the positive aspects. Again, the one almost-universal theme was a reference to the social aspects of the game and having either deepened existing friendships or developed new ones through playing the game together. Uniting all these individual themes, then, were ties to the social nature of *Magic*. The common themes that appeared weren't just positive social aspects, but these almost always factored in somehow, whether it was through the idea of *Magic* as a brotherhood, using the game as a way to make friends in a new town, or simply escaping the stress of everyday life by playing cards with some friends.

Magic may also represent an alternative route to masculine identity for many of those who play. Both the game and the type of fantasy it often represents are distinctly geared towards males, and its

competitive nature is an interesting parallel to such “male” activities as sports. Indeed, the social location of the hobby store is the center for not simply indulging in one’s hobby, but watching, interacting, and talking about the hobby, in much the same way as a sports bar provides a place for sports fans to interact. Significantly, many of the respondents were taught the game from older male friends or relatives. This may represent that *Magic* is not just a part of male identity for many players, but also represents an avenue for an alternative type of male socialization.

The overall, underlying theme of almost all my respondents was that involvement in *Magic* represented a way to not just have fun, but make new friendships and maintain old ones. The extent to which this was true varied, the ways in which it affected their lives differed, and one or two even felt the costs didn’t outweigh the benefits. Nevertheless, all talked openly about the role that *Magic* had played in their lives, whether it was through connecting them to other people, helping forge friendships by breaking down barriers, or helping them find and define their place in the world.

Over the course of this research I have come to the realization that for many hobby gamers—myself included—this is what really matters. Ultimately, we don’t really care about hobby gaming’s cultural visibility or the extent to which hobby gaming fan culture is ignored in academia. We don’t really care what the religious alarmists and the conservative pundits have to say about the subversive nature of *Dungeons and Dragons*, and we aren’t bothered by the derision of those who don’t understand our love of fantasy gaming. In the end what really matters is laughing, drinking and playing cards with friends until the wee hours of the morning.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE THREE KEY ELEMENTS OF HOBBY GAMES

What's Not a Hobby game?

A variety of existing activities and games bear many similarities to hobby games, but they inevitably differ in important ways. While they may be similar in gameplay or structure, ultimately they lack the three unique elements that define hobby games, as detailed below. To further clarify what hobby games are, I give descriptions of what doesn't qualify as a hobby game (and why), as well as elaborating in detail the three elements of hobby games and how they relate to individual genres.

Improvisational acting is often the closest parallel to role-playing games, with both sharing an emphasis on joint group storytelling. Yet such an activity, while fully immersing those involved in the shared fantasy experience and creativity of acting, contains no rules base with which to ground the fantasy and provide a common, external factor. Cosplay (short for "costumed play") is another common fan activity similar to role-playing (Stuever, 2000). In spite of this it differs in significant ways as the focus of role-playing is not on physical appearance (as with costumed play) but on imaginary interaction within the framework of external rules. Live action role-playing may be seen as a combination of role-playing and cosplay. However, the physical interaction required by some live action role-playing games is limited by the physical capabilities of the character. For many, this may remove them from the shared fantasy experience—after all, it is hard to "play" an expert swordsman when one is faced with one's own physical limitations. Traditional role-playing contains no such limitations, as the only constraining factors are the players' imagination and the loose framework of external rules provided by the game.

Board games such as Chess or Chinese Checkers may bear resemblance to tabletop strategy games. Both types of game require a great deal of strategy, have obvious physical elements, and foster interaction through competitive play. Yet Chess, Chinese Checkers and similar games exist outside of shared fantasy—at no point during a game of chess does one suspend one's disbelief and treat the

pieces as soldiers in a war. The creativity within the game is limited to the play style of each player, and the rules base (while theoretically able to be adjusted by the players) is designed to be structured and rigid. Other board games are even more limited than these. Chutes and ladders, for example, is based entirely on random chance and requires no interaction between those playing.

Card games such as poker and euchre often appear to share many elements with certain collectable card games. Indeed, the terminology for hobby card games such as “hand of cards” and “deck” is taken from traditional card games. Furthermore, the flexibility of a deck of playing cards means that players can change and create any rules they want within the physical context of the cards. But even this flexibility is more rigid than any hobby game, and it is limited to the product that exists—there are certainly no card companies out there producing playing cards with a fifth suit or additional numbers. As with Chess, there is also a lack of emphasis on creative and personal creation within the game, and almost no element of shared fantasy whatsoever. Most “traditional” games, then, do not fall under the category of hobby games, missing one or more of the important elements detailed below.

Flexible Rules

The first qualifying element of a hobby game is a flexible, ever-changing base of rules. Hobby gaming is a business, and as a result the company producing these complicated, often physically and artistically impressive games must get their money through the creation and distribution of hobby products. These products may include books detailing rules, rules guidelines, and optional styles of play. Other common products are the physical game elements these rules apply to—cards, figures, models and more. Were a company to stop producing new products, people would eventually move on to other games. Furthermore, there is a limited amount of “design space” within the context of any existing set of rules, limiting how varied the product can be (Rosewater, 2007). As a result, many of these products capitalize on the flexible nature of their game’s rules.

The most common type of rules changes are small, and affect the way the game is played in a limited fashion. Some changes, however, address the larger rules systems of the games themselves. These are often released in conjunction with products and described as “editions”. Occasionally, the very fabric and nature of how a game will be played and what this means will occur, but this happens very rarely. Such changes haven’t occurred in major hobby games since the 80’s, as the fan cultures around these games have become established. Most often, instead of changing the very nature of the game, the first game (say, a strategy game such as *Warhammer 40k*) will simply be represented in a new, broad genre. This occurred when the tabletop strategy game *Warhammer* was developed into a role-playing game in 2008 (Dark Heresy, 2010).

The most frequent, minor changes often are through the addition of new products, and in order to use the “new rules”, players must purchase the new products. Sometimes the changes occur through the subtraction or rectification of rules, often occurring in conjunction with the addition of rules. In doing so, the games do not become overwhelmed and bogged down by countless rules, thus allowing a continual influx of new players. Were someone to have to learn fifteen years’ worth of rules to be competitive at *Magic*, the game would be far more difficult to learn. When a change such as this occurs, usually some of the product produced by the game company is removed from the market. Such a removal gradually increases the rarity of these items over time (though many remain worthless, even to avid lovers of the game), and this makes up a large part of some hobby games’ secondary market.

The very existence of rules is important in hobby games, particularly for the more abstract genre of role-playing games. The fantasy and imagination required by these games obviously takes on an individual bent, and this may lead to conflict between players who imagine very different things. Without some external guidelines, it would be easy for the strongest personality of the group to simply push the “shared fantasy experience” of the group into a vision that makes sense to them. The rules systems for role-playing games create a standard for behavior, actions and reactions within the realm of

shared fantasy (albeit one that can be changed, ignored, or overruled), thus creating focus and necessary limitations. In doing so, it creates a shared element between each of the individual players. Without these rules, the aspect of shared fantasy would be impossible. This indicates one of the many ways the three aspects of hobby games interact to produce the unique experience hobby gaming provides.

Yet, these rules cannot be too rigid, and in order for a game to survive, it has to exist within a flexible framework that supports additions, subtractions and changes to the rules. The adjustment of rules is not limited to the game's producers, and often players are encouraged to use the rules as a "loose guideline", changing rules where their individual group sees fit and even creating their own rules or ways to play the game. Some of these alternate ways to play games spread beyond the original group and become embraced by the larger culture as a whole, sometimes even being incorporated into official supplements by the companies producing them. This occurred with the rise in popularity for "arena combat" in *Dungeons and Dragons*, and the increase in the ultra-casual "Eternal Dragon Highlander" format for *Magic* (Official Elder Dragon Highlander Rules, 2010), with the parent company Wizards of the Coast even making products marketed to these niche audiences within the game themselves. The creation and adjustment of rules to a particular play group also highlights one of the three necessary elements to any hobby game: the ability to approach the game in a creative fashion, imbuing one's own self and personality into the game in a very real way.

Creative Elements

To fully qualify as a hobby game, a creative element needs to exist within the game as well. Depending on the style of game, it may be linked to the shared fantasy aspect—after all, the ability to create and run a narrative story requires a lot of imagination. As stated, other games (particularly collectable games) may emphasize the game's creative nature by allowing players to find new and

interesting ways to adjust, subtract or add to the rules, or creating new and original combinations of existing cards to do something unusual or different. Due (at least in part) to both the games' inherent flexibility and the reliance (large or small) on shared fantasy, there exists in these games the ability to imbue one's creative self in them or on them. This creative element is, more than any other, variable on an individual basis between gamers.

The most basic aspect of creativity (and investing one's creative self in the game) may be best represented by tabletop strategy games. The models for many of these games—particularly popular games such as *Warhammer* (a dark gothic fantasy setting) or *Warhammer 40,000* (a dystopian sci-fi setting)—come in multiple parts, either pewter or plastic. There are “official” ways of building and painting them, but individual creativity, both for model building and paint schemes, is an integral part of the game, and one the game's creators encourage heavily. Indeed, often the creative aspect of the game is given more preeminence than that of the strategy aspect, with awards for modeling and painting far surpassing the prestige (and material reward) for those who excel at playing the game (Demon Winner, 2008).

As with the shared fantasy aspect of role-playing games, the creative aspect of tabletop strategy games is outlined by the existing rules system, and in order to play in official tournaments, there must be some recognition between the existing rules and a player's accompanying models. Yet, this is a line that can be blurred, often using one faction's set of rules to represent something entirely different and unique. Other people, such as my brother, eschew the game (in this case *Warhammer 40,000*) altogether and focus on the creative aspect, purchasing the models and assembling and painting them in totally unique ways. Occasionally *Warhammer* and *Warhammer 40,000* players will model and paint their army as part of an “official” faction supported by the game company, but the vast majority of players I've met and discussed this with online invest at least something of themselves in it. Even with this, the player needs to decide which units to build and how to represent that “official” faction—a

minor creative decision, but one that qualifies. Most of the time, however, the level of creativity exhibited exists between these two extremes.

Ostensibly, certain forms of *Magic* can require the least amount of creativity to play. Creating a unique 60-card combination that works well in challenging and competitive formats is one of the most appealing aspects of the game to many players (myself included). Yet this creativity often comes at a price, as the creative players experience a steep learning curve in existing competitive formats. Many players prefer to use others' tried and true decks, scouring *Magic* websites and major tournament reports for the "best" ways to combine 60 cards. Needless to say, the aspect of creating a deck for oneself gives one a far more intimate understanding of how it runs than simply pirating someone else's idea (in a process creative types pejoratively label "netdecking"). Regardless, certain deck "archetypes" become popular, and the level of creativity people invest into their tournament decks often is limited to minor adjustments to someone else's idea.

I argue that one of the defining elements of hobby games is that the game must allow the player to invest themselves in a creative and personal manner. However, just because someone *can* do this does not mean they *have* to in order to enjoy the game. This is especially true within the extensive rules structure and vast physical product line of *Magic*. It is worth noting here that dozens of ways to play *Magic* exist, all generally varying in the overall importance that personal creativity is required—however, it is ultimately the individual player who decides this. Furthermore, it needs to be understood that to be successful at *Magic* at all, some level of creativity and imagination is necessary. The complex and varied problem solving needed to play *Magic* doesn't simply require a knowledge of the game, nor a knowledge of one's opponent, the ability to calculate probability (both with the game pieces in play and those in potentiality), or the ability to read an opponent. It requires combinations of all these things and much more, and those players who are artistic or creative often have a unique insight into the game.

Shared Fantasy

Perhaps the most unique and defining aspect of hobby gaming is known as shared fantasy. Gary Alan Fine best describes this important aspect of the hobby game experience in his book “Shared Fantasy” (1983). While defining fantasy role-playing games, Alan states that collective fantasy

lacks the seemingly random, illogical feature of dreaming; it does not have the egocentric or autistic qualities that Freud and Piaget discuss as characteristic of fantasy (or psychotic) states. Because gaming fantasy is based in shared experiences, it must be constructed through shared communication. *This communication is possible only when a shared set of references exist for the key images and a clear set of expectations exist for which actions are legitimate.* Gaming fantasy combines the expressive freedom of fantasy with the structure characteristic of games. It is neither as rule-governed as games, because of its fantasy components, nor as free-floating as fantasy, because of its organization, which derives from the gaming model (1983: p.3).

In this way, Fine demonstrates how the three aspects of hobby games—flexible rules, creative and personal input, and shared fantasy—are all linked and dependent upon one another. By definition, the act of participating in shared fantasy requires some level of personal input and creativity. The shared fantasy experience may be immersive and deeply developed, as with the role-playing games he discusses here, or it may be abstract and theoretical in nature, as with more structured hobby games such as *Magic*.

Regardless of the depth of this experience, Fine makes sure to emphasize the important role the rules play in the game. Without some form of external reference, it becomes impossible for the players to unite their experience. Yet, rules and order are limiting by their very nature, and seem antithetical to the fantasy experience. The compromise, obviously, is flexible rules that can often be treated as guidelines—guidelines without which the joint fantasy experience would be impossible.

The shared fantasy that Fine describes is the most important element of role-playing games, one of the main genres of hobby games. To some extent, the mixture of fantasy and imagination within the structure of games is representative of all hobby games, with each individual game being a unique combination of the two aspects. Yet, shared fantasy is undoubtedly best demonstrated by role-playing

games. Within these games, those playing—usually in groups of three or more—create and interact in a fantasy world of their own devising. This is a group process and involves the suspension of disbelief. As any veteran role-player knows, if one person doesn't take it seriously, it's that much harder to remain immersed in the fantasy.

The shared fantasy embraced by tabletop strategy game players is less immersive, taking place not in the imagination but through physical representations of mythical creatures, historical armies, futuristic aliens or any other type of model representing a specific setting. The “background setting” for these games is usually incredibly vast, detailed and elaborate, framing the games within a historic context that can rival real history books. The shared fantasy involving tabletop strategy games is less likely to be of the personal immersive nature exemplified by role-playing, and is more likely to revolve around the game itself. Tabletop strategy game players tend to suspend disbelief while playing, often acting as though their models have a mind of their own and referring to the representations on the board by their fictional historical names. Players can abstain from any level of shared fantasy while playing tabletop strategy games (and indeed, I have encountered and played these people), but this inevitably changes the nature of the game. It becomes less about the experience of playing and more about winning an arbitrary game, using arbitrary rules and fake toy soldiers. Needless to say, I have found that these games are most fun when played with others who appreciate similar aspects of the hobby instead of just exhibiting a competitive desire to win at the cost of creativity and shared fantasy.

Of all hobby games, collectable games such as *Magic* require the least amount of shared fantasy between players. When *Magic* was first created, there was an emphasis on shared fantasy similar in some ways to the character creation process of role-playing games. The players in *Magic* each represent plainwalkers—powerful wizards who can cross time and reality and possessing the rare ability to visit multiple planes of existence. The deck of *Magic* cards each player uses represents their resources, spells, and monsters they can summon to their aide, and according to early game guides, a

game of *Magic* would occur when two plainwalkers would meet and battle for dominion. This original aspect of the game best emphasizes the idea of shared fantasy. Over time, however, the “plainwalker” idea has become more and more abstract, and the idea of players as all-powerful wizards has been largely removed from official *Magic* terminology. The result of this is much the same as the creative aspect—those that wish to engage in the shared fantasy involving *Magic* are able to do so and largely do so in groups with like-minded players.

The argument could be made that the structure and nature of *Magic* devalues or deemphasizes the importance of both the creative and shared fantasy aspects of hobby gaming. I believe this is not the case. Instead, I feel that the game is broad enough for each person to decide how important these individual elements are to them. This is not the case with role-playing games and less so with tabletop strategy games, both of which possess far more of an emphasis on these aspects. The result is that *Magic* possesses a broad yet flexible structure and external set of rules and the *ability* to invest oneself in it, without actually demanding this personal investment. As such, it becomes much easier for strangers to interact with each other in a broader and less intimate fashion than is involved in games with a heavy emphasis on shared fantasy.

APPENDIX B

HISTORY OF HOBBY GAMES

Introduction and Early History

Magic is a unique and complex game, and I believe that to truly understand it, one must at least have an idea of the history surrounding both it and other hobby games. Only by doing this can one truly understand the motivations behind those involved in hobby game subcultures. In light of this, I give here a brief account of how hobby games came to exist. Various types of games have existed throughout human history. However, the hobby game is a modern cultural text, existing only since the early 1970's. Hobby games are far more than the simple children's board games we may associate the term "table top gaming" with, yet some classic games were, in many ways, precursors to hobby games. Chess, the European representation of wargames, was one such precursor. Over time, wargames slowly grew in complexity, with examples and instances of units represented by models and chance determined by dice rolls (Fine, 1983).

In 1916, the first commercially produced wargame was made (Fine, 1983). Intended for children, it nevertheless paved the way for more adult-themed wargames that would follow. These were almost always historical in nature, and at first glance appear similar to tabletop strategy hobby games. However, they lacked key aspects of hobby games, including the flexible and changing rules base, shared fantasy, and an emphasis on creativity—after all, when playing a game that aims to recreate historic events, there is only so much room for imagination.

Role-playing Games

The early elements of what would later become role-playing games (and later tabletop strategy games) began to appear in the late 1960s. One group of players began expanding their notions of wargames, moving past games based strictly on historical battles. Gary Gygax, an avid wargamer and

lover of the western fantasy settings best exemplified by J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth setting, began creating medieval settings for his wargames. Gradually, he and his friends began introducing some limited fantasy elements such as wizards and dragons into them. As this transformation progressed, the level of creativity, personal input, and reliance on shared fantasy increased also (Fine, 1983). Gygax created the first fantasy setting for wargames, called *Chainmail*—a precursor in many ways to both role-playing games and tabletop strategy games (Fine, 1983). Over time, the focus of *Chainmail* became the heroic figures central to each “battle”—heroic figures born not out of history, but inspired by western myth and legend and brought to life in the minds of the players. Expanded rules grew and were created to bring life to these characters, but they were still limited to existing in the physical realm as small pewter miniatures.

In 1974, Gygax changed all that, completing and producing *Dungeons and Dragons*, the world's first role-playing game. He began selling the rulebooks for detailing mystical adventures, as well as other assorted products one would need to play (such as dice). The increasing focus of his and his friend's wargames on individual characters created in them a desire to bring these characters to life more fully. *Dungeons and Dragons* allowed them to do this, and in addition to being the first role-playing game it was also what I consider to be the first true hobby game.

Tabletop Strategy Games

Dungeons and Dragons and the role-playing games it inspired also contributed strongly to the creation of the other major hobby game genres. Traditional wargaming lead to the creation of role-playing games, so it was unsurprising when the aspects of the hobby that made *D and D* unique—flexible rules, creative and personal input, and shared fantasy—were in turn applied to tabletop strategy games. The transition of these types of wargames into the hobby gaming world is less clear cut than the creation of role-playing games; nevertheless the change, while gradual, created a markedly different

gaming experience, de-emphasizing the personal and singular nature of role-playing games while still maintaining the important elements of hobby games.

The fantasy-based tabletop strategy game *Warhammer*, as well as its gothic sci-fi counterpart *Warhammer 40,000*, are two of the most iconic tabletop strategy games. The creation of *Warhammer* in 1983 signaled the first true hobby wargame, and also became one of the first widespread non-role-playing hobby games. Early on, the influence of role-playing games on tabletop strategy games was obvious, with many containing an emphasis on unique heroes in the game. In a way, the early world of hobby games had come full circle, and over time the genre settled, resembling the wargames that had inspired RPGs. Unlike previous wargames, however, *Warhammer* insisted on some level of shared fantasy between players.

Tabletop strategy games are often steeped in story and mythos, and understanding and knowing their background (colloquially known as “fluff” amongst wargamers) is often as important as playing the game itself. Even if one is interested only in the strategic aspects of the game, a sort of shared fantasy exists between players. By the very nature of playing the game, players are agreeing on the symbolic meaning that each figure, model, and rule represents. They most often refer to “effects” in the game as occurring in real life, and even the most rational players are often superstitious with regards to chance and dice rolling (myself included). I have yet to meet a single wargamer who doesn’t hold some minor superstition, a lineage that seems to have carried on from role-playing games (Fine, 1983).

Collectable Games

By the end of the 1980s, the disadvantages to both tabletop strategy games and role-playing games were well known amongst game distributors. The amount of space and time needed to play both tabletop strategy games and role-playing games often hindered public playing. Nowhere was this more

evident than at gaming conventions. In 1991, events were set in motion that would change this forever. A math professor named Richard Garfield met with then-CEO of small game producer Wizards of the Coast, Peter Adkison. Rejecting Richard's first idea (a complicated racing board game involving robots), Adkison commissioned him to produce a portable, easy-to-introduce game that could be played during the immense amount of downtime that occurred at large gaming conventions. The game needed to be portable, quick to teach, quick to play (compared to most hobby games, at any rate), and appeal to the existing culture of hobby gamers. Garfield quickly came back with his idea—a trading card game set in the fantasy world called *Magic: The Gathering*. He spent the next two years developing and testing the game, before releasing it to widespread acclaim in 1993 (Adkison, 2009).

Magic became a runaway hit, and early on the game's producer—Seattle-based company Wizards of the Coast—was unable to keep up with demand (Adkison, 2009). With the initial set containing 295 cards, and multiple expansion sets with additional cards and additional rules following soon after, gameplay proved to be incredibly varied. Indeed, amongst my group of veteran gamers, we have a saying: you never play the same game of *Magic* twice. The portability and small play space required meant that it was instantly adopted by a wider group, and while the early *Magic* crowd often consisted of *Dungeons and Dragons* players, the broader fantasy appeal of *Magic* (as well as its relative ease of teaching) helped spread beyond the initial fan base.

For these reasons and many more, *Magic* had an easy time spreading between friends and hobby game cultures. Instead of massive armies containing dozens of models and a massive table, one only needs a 60-card deck and enough play space to lay the cards down. Instead of the numerous hours and intimate group required for *Dungeons and Dragons*, one only needs 20 minutes and another *Magic* player. And should one be lacking another *Magic* player, the basics of the game can be taught to the uninitiated in a matter of minutes—while the finer points of strategy, rules application and gameplay can take years to learn, ensuring that veterans rarely get bored of the game.

APPENDIX C

DETAILED EXPLANATION OF HOBBY GAMES

Introduction

One of the most vital aspects to increasing acceptance of a cultural text is to increase both the text's visibility and the understanding of the text. While the motivations behind gaming may be discussed in the body of my thesis, a detailed discussion of gameplay for many types of hobby games are not. By understanding the basic mechanics behind the games (and gaining greater insight into the way that *Magic* is played), one can better understand the nature of the cultures based around these texts.

Role-playing Games Explained

Throughout my life, role-playing games have consistently been the most difficult hobby game to explain. Put simply, role-playing games allow a group of people to interact in an imaginary story, using a series of complex rules for interactions between their avatars within the game—most often referred to as “player characters”. Typically, one person creates the imaginary setting, providing the starting point for the dramatic storytelling. This person, often referred to as the game master (or in classic *D and D* terms, the “Dungeon Master”) also plays the part of the heroes’ villains, allies, as well as any wayward bystanders, shopkeepers or other individuals the heroes encounter. While the game master creates the basic backdrop for the world, describes the physical environment, and ultimately controls what occurs within the context of the game, the player characters are the main focus, driving the story through their actions (or inactions!) and affecting the outcome of the story with the choices their characters make.

In order to provide a common point for the shared fantasy the players are generating, a series of rules exist within the game—general guidelines for the physical, social, and often magical aspects of the pretend world the players inhabit. In order to simulate reality, the players don't automatically accomplish tasks (other than mundane tasks we would never have a problem with in the real world,

such as climbing stairs or cooking a meal). Instead, they use chance to determine if an action succeeds or not. This is most often represented through the rolling of dice. Each task is generally assigned a number (with countless pages of large books providing the difficulty of various tasks, the accompanying numbers, and the appropriate context). Should a number be exceeded on a die roll, the task succeeds; should it not be, the task fails.

Each character is proficient at certain things depending on their fictional background, and as such the “physical” representation of the characters is a series of statistics demonstrating the character’s various proficiencies. These statistics can influence the rolling of the dice, so those who are more experienced have a higher chance of success than those that are not. These “character sheets” are the main physical aspect of role-playing games, being a tangible link to the common rules uniting those sharing the fantasy of role-playing. However, these rules are more guidelines than anything else, allowing near infinite possibilities for those that wish to change or adjust them. One popular *Dungeons and Dragons* expert puts it best, stating that “in *Dungeons and Dragons* the only limits are the imagination and mom's frequent intrusions into your privacy while you're gaming,” (Parsons and Sumner, 2009: p.8).

Role-playing games are an important aspect of hobby game fan culture, both in a broad sense and, for many groups of friends, in a very specific sense. Furthermore, *Dungeons and Dragons* can be said to have created the hobby gaming industry, and in a matter of years it had expanded production to various rules books, adventure modules, and tomes full of frightening (and often ridiculous) monsters. There were also the inevitable imitators. Some games were outright imitators of *Dungeons and Dragons*, while other games expanded the concept of hobby gaming into different genres such as sci-fi, horror, or westerns. *Dungeons and Dragons* itself was heavily influenced by the world of J.R.R. Tolkien and various western mythologies, and while plagued by problems early on (such as accusations of witchcraft or the occasional copyright infringement charge) nevertheless inspired the idea of “high fantasy” for an entire

generation of gamers.

Tabletop Strategy Games Explained

The level of creativity available to those playing these games was far greater than that in historical games. By creating a loose yet detailed fictional backdrop, the producers of tabletop strategy games give players a wide range of options, effectively creating an entire fictional world with gaps the players can fill in at their leisure. Most tabletop strategy games are far less about shared fantasy than role-playing games, however. After all, the focus on the game is not on the product of joint imagination as much as it is on actual, physical models. The games themselves vary, but most follow a similar set of rules. The game is played on a specially designated area, often referred to as a gaming table. Most games are played on 6"x 4" tables, while some are played on 4"x 4" tables. The tables are arranged with appropriately themed and sized terrain, ranging from small pine trees looted from miniature railroad sets to appropriately sized buildings savaged by the fires of war.

One of the main differences is that instead of an imaginary setting, the interactions are represented by miniature armies, ranging in size but most often being around the 8 millimeter range. Typically, each player creates an "army" by selecting their faction, then purchasing a number of units according to the agreed upon points total for the game. The points for each individual unit is detailed in their faction's sourcebook, along with the special rules and statistics that unit or model has. As in role-playing games, chance is used to represent interactions within the shared fantasy of the game, and the statistics of each unit or model further affect the chance by adding or subtracting from the number needed to roll or adjusting the number of dice one is allowed to roll.

Unlike the varied and loose structure of role-playing games, tabletop strategy games have a very specific turn structure. Each player takes turns, although inevitably the interaction between opposing armies means each player is active to some limited degree during the other's turn. During the turn,

certain actions typically can only be done during the appropriate “phases”. Most tabletop strategy games have a “movement phase”, a “shooting phase”, and a “close combat phase”, and the appropriate action can only be taken during the allotted phase. The order of these phases inevitably changes for each game, and some fantasy games also have a “magic phase”, further detailing the shared fantasy aspects of these games. While traditional wargames may seek to recreate the battles of history or simply “destroy” the opposing army, tabletop strategy games often have different goals or ways to win. Sometimes a player can lose far more units than their opponent but, through clever maneuvering and quick thinking, still achieve the game’s objective and claim victory.

Both role-playing games and tabletop strategy games necessitate a certain level of interaction between the respondents. However, both have historically had some disadvantages. *Dungeons and Dragons* can be an incredibly immersive and meaningful experience with other players. However, the reliance on others’ adherence to this shared fantasy is, in its own way, a downside, for if someone breaks the fantasy it can be difficult for others to enjoy it. Furthermore, the games often take hours for a single session, and being collaborative storytelling games, it’s often hard to tell when a game should start or end.

Tabletop strategy games carry their own set of disadvantages. A typical game of *Warhammer 40,000* can last anywhere from two to four hours, and sometimes more. Furthermore, larger games necessitate more product, meaning dozens or sometimes even hundreds of small miniatures need to be transported. In addition, one can’t just sit down at a kitchen table and play a quick game of *Warhammer*—and even if one could, the level of personal and creative investment needed means players tend to take playing somewhat seriously. To truly play the game one needs a lot of space, an appropriately sized table, and specific game pieces. While these disadvantages can all be overcome in the home setting—I myself have a room and a table dedicated to tabletop strategy games—the sheer bulk of miniatures often makes playing in public settings difficult, potentially limiting both interaction

with other players and leading to a less than varied hobby experience.

Collectable Games Explained

Magic changed the hobby gaming world forever, making it less insular and introducing fans to a game that was fast to play, portable, and easy to learn. However, the most unique aspect of *Magic* compared to its hobby game predecessors was its collectable nature. Unlike tabletop strategy games, where one knows what game piece one is buying, *Magic* is sold in packs of fifteen randomized cards and boxes of sixty randomized cards. Being both a trading card game and a strategy game, creator Richard Garfield decided it was logical to make some cards rarer than others. Thus, the game had three rarities—rare, uncommon, and common—all with declining levels of power. Packs generally contain one rare, three uncommon, and twelve common cards. The existence of a trading element in the game that was supported by the differing rarities, as well as the differing power levels and themes of certain cards, had a number of important effects on the game, and may (in part) account for *Magic's* widespread success.

The trading aspect introduced a previously absent element of interaction between players—even if one doesn't want to play a game, every *Magic* player likes trading! Furthermore, the rarity of certain cards, as well as a demand for the ability to purchase cards without having to resort to the randomness of buying packs, led to a massive secondary market. Across the country, comic shops, sports card trading shops, hobby stores and wargaming stores began selling not only packs of *Magic* cards but individual cards that had been traded back to the store. Again, this element of trading added a unique level of interaction to hobby gaming—players didn't just purchase from their hobby store, they “invested” in it by selling back or trading individual cards.

The runaway success of *Magic* led to numerous collectable trading card games; some varied immensely from the product that inspired them, both in the setting they represented (anything from

horror to sci-fi to modern vampire wars) and the rules used. Others (often the more short-lived games) were blatant *Magic* knock-offs, hoping to simply cash in quickly on the trend. Over time, numerous collectable card games (or CCG's) have risen and fallen, but *Magic* remains the most iconic and the most widespread (What is *Magic: The Gathering?* 2010).

The notion of a collectable game wasn't limited to card games, and in 2000, the gaming company WizKids introduced the game *Mage Knight*—a game of collectable, pre-made, pre-painted miniatures of varying rarity available for purchase in randomized packs. Collectable miniatures games have since sprung up for a variety of genres, utilizing many of the collectable and strategic aspects of collectible card games, as well as some limited aspects of tabletop strategy games. As with CCGs, collectable markets inevitably arise for these games. However, they are less widespread than *Magic*. This may be due to a greater investment in money, less portability for the products, and the often low production quality of the plastic figures.

Magic changed the hobby gaming world permanently, quickly becoming one of the most successful, influential and widespread hobby games, as well as creating an entirely new sub-genre of collectable games. It has met with continued success in the years since its release. In 1997, Wizards of the Coast was successful enough to purchase the bankrupt company producing *Dungeons and Dragons*, saving the iconic role-playing game and incorporating it into their successful production and distribution network. Wizards of the Coast typically releases four new sets of *Magic* each year, usually with a “yearly theme” of both rules and setting (What is *Magic: The Gathering?* 2010). These are inevitably met with fervent anticipation amongst the *Magic* community, and signify the game's continued ability to both entertain and bring people together.

Detailed Explanation of *Magic* Gameplay

While *Magic* is easier to explain than many other hobby games, it is still a tremendously complicated game. As mentioned in Chapter Three, the goal of *Magic* is to defeat your opponent, most often by reducing their “life points” from twenty to zero. This is done using the resources and spells at the player’s disposal, as represented by different types of cards. In a broad sense, there are three types of cards in a player’s deck. The first (and possibly most important) type of cards are simply called lands. Lands produce the magical energy needed to “cast spells”—in other words, lands are a resource within the game that you use to play your cards, and can use once each turn. Lands are free to put onto the battlefield (the area between players where the match is fought), although you can only play one a turn. More powerful cards often have more powerful mana costs, meaning that you have to wait until later in the game to play them. Thus, many decks are balanced somewhere between cheap, early spells, designed to achieve goals quickly, and large, expensive spells designed to have a large impact on the game.

Typically, each land produces a type of colored mana which can be used to cast corresponding spells. The basic land types are indelibly linked to the “colors” within *Magic*, and each color represents a certain philosophy, both within the game and within the context of greater mythology. Plains produce white mana, used to cast spells that reflect the nature of order, lawfulness, life, holiness, and martial law. Islands produce blue mana, used to cast spells that reflect thought, the classical elements of air and water, mind control, and the ephemeral aspects of wizardry itself. Swamps produce black mana, used to cast spells that embody death, despair, necromancy, and the intervention of diabolic forces. Mountains produce red mana, used to cast spells that embody chaos, raw emotion, war, the classical elements of fire and earth, and such classic fantasy creatures as dragons and goblins. Forests produce green mana, used to cast spells that emphasize the strength and virility of nature, the viciousness of the natural cycle, the destruction and decomposition of man-made artifice, and large and terrifying

creatures. In this way, we see how the rules of the game are influenced—and in turn influence—the general themes of the game.

The second major type of card is the “permanent” spell. Lands are also classified as permanents, but are a resource the player draws on, whereas permanent spells are cards that the player puts onto the battlefield and remain in game indefinitely. These are most often artifacts (magical tools), enchantments (spells that remain in game and affect it somehow), and creatures summoned by the player to fight on his behalf.

Creatures are one of the most iconic aspects of *Magic*, and easily the most common path to victory or defeat. All creatures have a score for power—representing how much damage they can deal—and toughness—representing how much damage they can take before being removed from play. Thus, if a creature has a power of 2 it can deal either 2 points of life damage to a player, or destroy another creature with a toughness of 2 or less. If it has a toughness of 3, it can be destroyed by creatures with power 3 or greater, or “block”—that is to say, prevent a creature from attacking the defending player directly—and survive if the power is 2 or less. A creature such as this would have its power and toughness represented on the bottom-right hand side of the card, as such: 2/3. There are thousands of different *Magic* cards, and countless combinations, styles of play, decks, and ways to win the game. Yet, the battle between iconic fantasy creatures—angels, daemons, dragons, nature spirits, and leviathans—remains the most well-known and beloved aspect of *Magic* gameplay.

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

What hobby games do you play?

How long have you played *Magic*/other hobby games?

How did you get started playing *Magic*/other hobby games?

(If school): How big was your school?

(If school): How many kids played at your school?

(If school): What other activities were you involved in while playing *Magic*?

How many friends do you have that play *Magic*/other hobby games? Close/casual?

How much time per week on *Magic*, approx.? Solo or social?

How has *Magic*/hobby games influenced your life? Describe the impact it's had, if any.

What does *Magic* provide for you? Why do you play?

What is your favorite aspect of *Magic*/hobby games?

What is your least favorite aspect of *Magic*/hobby games?

Have you ever experienced any impact on social life or how you're perceived due to *Magic*/hobby games?

Would you say *Magic* has had a positive/negative/neutral impact on your life?

How important is *Magic*/hobby gaming in your life on a 1-10 scale?

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