

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

And this is Nat.

NAT: Hello, My name is Nat Neal Bale!

He is teaching me how to play Magic The Gathering at the Brooklyn Strategist, which is the same game shop where I learned to play D&D a few years ago. But where D&D is a role-playing game, Magic is very much a card game. By the way, Magic is the shorthand that most people call Magic the Gathering, and so I'll mostly call it "Magic" in this episode.

NAT: There are two different types of cards, lands and spells...

In a way, Magic is like any other card game. You need a combination of luck and skill to win. It's usually only played with two people. You each take seven cards out of a deck of sixty.

But it's not a generic deck of cards. Each of the cards shows a creature or a spell or a magical artifact you can use to attack your opponent. And some cards represent the source of your magic, which are lands. The more land cards you have, the more magic you can wield against your opponent. Your goal is to knock your opponent down from 20 points to zero points.

Sounds simple? Well, it's not. It's really not.

Remember when I said you're choosing 7 cards from a deck of 60? Well, that deck of 60 cards is 60 cards that you chose from well over 10,000 cards that Wizards of the Coast – the company that makes Magic the Gathering -- has put out over the last quarter century. And there's a whole mythology that unites those cards.

Magic the Gathering takes place in a multiverse. Every new deck of cards Wizards of the Coast puts out takes place in a different parallel universe, which is called a "plane." And some of the cards represent plane walkers, the main characters in the game who can jump from one parallel universe to another.

This year, Magic is celebrating its 25th anniversary. I always knew Magic the Gathering was a huge subculture. But I avoided doing an episode about it because I was intimidated. When I'd go to play D&D at the Brooklyn Strategist and we'd all be role playing our characters like we were in a medieval improv troupe, I'd look over at the table where people were playing Magic the Gathering, and it was like they were speaking a whole other language.

It continues to amaze me that Magic is still so popular. This game was developed in the early '90s by a mathematician named Richard Garfield back when there was very little competition from video games. Now so many tired and true brands of analog games and toys are struggling to compete against Play Stations and iPad apps. Magic does have an app, but the handheld card game is the main focus. And Magic is not struggling to compete. In this century, the game has been on an epic run -- with each year being more profitable the last.

So I had two questions about the game I was trying to figure out. First, why has it survived the onslaught of digital games? And secondly, how do you create a sense of story and world building in a non-sequential card game? Does that world building make for a better card game? Or is it something the players ignore as they just focus on a winning the game?

To answer those questions, I went straight to the top, the head designer for Magic the Gathering: Mark Rosewater.

CLIP: I'm pulling out of my driveway! We all know what that means! It's time for another episode of drive to work!

By the way, that is how he starts every episode of his podcast, as he drives to his office outside Seattle, talking about different aspects of. And he doesn't just do a podcast. He is out there on every media platform talking about the game, answering questions from players – he is a FORCE of personality.

Mark has been with the company since in the mid '90s, when Magic the Gathering was just a few years old. I have to say, in all my years of interviewing people; I have never met anyone who absolutely LOVES their job as much as he does.

MARK: My job is to come up with really cool things that will make players really really excited and then I have to not talk about it for 16 to 24 months usually. So for example this did last December we put out a product called unstable which is kind of like a humorous take on magic, and I've been working on this project for seven years. And I had to not talk about it for seven years. And so when I finally got to talk about people like wow you're so excited. I'm like I've been waiting to talk about it for seven years!

Mark says one of the reasons why Magic has stayed popular over 25 years is because the game never stops evolving.

As I mentioned earlier, the premise of the game is that there are there are parallel universes called planes. Each of the planes is a contained in a set of cards. And the frequency in which Wizards of the Coast introduces new planes has gone from every few years, to every year, and now sometimes twice a year.

And Magic started out being a standard fantasy game with elves and wizards, but pretty quickly than ran out of those tropes and had to push the boundaries of what makes a fantasy world. So they've introduced a fantasy world where everything's made of metal, or a world that's like a Steampunk version of India. But Mark says:

MARK: A set of cards is a very challenging way to tell a story. Not everybody sees every card and they don't see them in the same order. So what we've done is we tend to use our cards to build the environment to build the world to flesh out the world and hint at the story and then we tend to tell the story through other means.

Like on the Magic website, there is a lot of ancillary material explaining what's going on in these worlds. But eventually, they decided to up the ante on the design of the cards, so when you encounter a new deck, you automatically feel something about this world without having to read anything about it.

MARK: We want to figure out what the emotional core of the experience is going to be that the mechanics aren't just about doing something that and making you feel something and it really got into the idea of we're going to go to a gothic horror world and we're going to make you afraid because it's a gothic horror

world or we're going to go to a Greek mythology world and you're going to be a hero and go on adventures and make something of yourself.

There are three basic elements to each card.

First, there's an illustration, which is about two square inches, but there is so much drama and story in those little paintings, you feel like you're looking at a movie screen.

Secondly, there are statistics about how this creature or spell functions as a card. And I did not realize how many different ways a card can behave in a game, I mean it is endless in terms of how many points you gain, or take away from your opponent, whether the card should be on the offensive or the defense, how many times you can use the card. And the game mechanics are not random. They really reflect the personality of whatever is on the card.

And the third major element to every card is something called "flavor text," which are basically a few lines of description. But even the flavor text has gotten much more ambitious over the years – not in terms of how many words they can cram into a card, but how succinctly they can paint a picture of a broad story beyond that one card.

MARK: And one of my favorite is the flavor text. This from a long time ago but it's the one that has stuck with me. There's a card in a set called we went to the icy world is called Ice Age and there was a card in it called Lurgoif which was this horrible monster based loosely based on some Norse stuff. The flavor text on it was Ack! Hans! Run! Verlurgoif! Last words of Sofie Eriksdodder and somehow just like this idea that like you know this poor this poor woman the last thing we learned about her is she's scared to death because she knows how horrible this creature is and she is right because that's the last thing she ever says.

But the thing that Mark is most passionate about is an aspect of the game called The Color Pie. When I first heard about the color pie I thought it seemed kind of esoteric – but I began to realize it's really the lifeblood of the game. It's the thing that makes you feel like you're actually wielding magic when you play with the cards.

All of the cards are divided into five colors – white, black, red, blue and green. Each color represents a different philosophy of magic. So white

magic is orderly. Black magic promotes ruthless individualism. Red magic is passionate and fiery. Blue magic is brainy. Green magic is in harmony with nature.

MARK: Growing up. My dad was very into games and so I got my love of games from my dad. My mom was a psychologist and she really got me in love with psychology and with just emotions in general and that one of the neat things about the color pie that I love is it explains motivations in a way that doesn't demean the motivations like one of the things that's really interesting. It's made me think about life a little differently is nobody's right or wrong. They just have a reason for doing the things the way they do them. And it's like oh, what are their motivations and. Well if you're motivated by this then it makes sense you come in conflict who's motivated by that. I could argue and I have I can argue any color from any perspective that one of the things I did for fun it because I'm a writer is I did an interview and my articles where I spent a whole column with each of the colors interviewing the colors having the color explain from their perspective why they do what they do.

My Magic instructor, Nat, showed me how this plays out at the game shop.

NAT: Notice you don't have a lot of creature, they're not about building bodies, they're about doing tricky things.

The biggest surprise for me right now how much the colors influence the game play. It's really interesting.

NAT: Yep, each color has a very distinct personality in game play the colors you use tend to define what your deck does.

In my first game, I played with a deck of cards where everything was red, so the magic I was using was fiery and impulsive. That's actually my natural instinct when I play games, and I usually lose because going on impulse is my downfall when I'm not thinking strategically. Meanwhile, Nat was playing with a deck of black magic, which is all about sucking away your opponent's energy and using it for yourself.

NAT: And you're going to take one damage from the tattered mummy

So I only have one point left – so I'm dead?

NAT: Yep!

Ooooh.

Brady Dommermuth (DOMER-Mouth) was a lead writer on the creative team at Magic. He says when he would work on developing a new deck of cards, he always thought about how the story they're telling with the cards should reflect the experience of how people play with the cards.

BRADY: Magic defies one of the most common ethos prescriptions in fantasy. And by that I mean you know what's the what's the basic moral message of the story and fantasy a lot of times is sure you're the chosen one and you're destined to save the world. But you're going to need your friends to help you out. And in doing so but in magic I felt like it in terms of the story and the world designed that form needed to follow function and in magic the vast majority of games are played one versus one it's you versus me it's my deck versus your deck and either you're going to win or I'm going to win. There's always a winner and a loser. Which to me suggested a different ethos, which is sure of course you have to have friends that's super important. But in the final fight when it matters you're going to have to fight alone.

In fact, he thinks Magic doesn't quite fit into the fantasy genre. Fantasy tends to be black and white in its morality. But in Magic you're not automatically a villain if you use black magic and you're not automatically a hero if you use white magic. In that sense, he thinks Magic actually reflects the moral ambiguity of science fiction.

BRADY: Mark Rosewater and I have talked about this many times how Star Wars is a fantasy story in sci-fi clothing where are Magic is a sci-fi story in fantasy clothing.

So after I got beat using red magic, I switched to a deck of blue cards, where the spells and creatures were brainer and trickier. And by the way, you can play any combination of colors, but since I was a newbie, Nat felt that I should play one color at a time. Although when you do play Magic, you should pick colors that complimentary to each other, like red and black magic, or blue and white magic.

Anyway, when I switched from fiery red magic to brainy blue magic, the cards worked so different, I really felt like I was relying on a different part of my brain. And my teacher Nat had switched from black to white magic, so I felt like I was playing against a different opponent.

Wow, I feel overwhelmed right now.

NATH: Sorry Magic can do this

It's fine every card has so many levels to it

NAT: Yep! It's all good, this game takes a long time to learn, it's a very, very complex game!

But that's when I realized how story comes into this. To be a good Magic player, you need to know WHY your cards behave the way they do. And to do that, you need to go on the Magic website and read the lore behind your cards.

NAT: One of the pushes in last 5 years was to make the cards reflect story events more aggressively so that by playing the game and watching what the cards do, you can effectively learn how the story went.

In fact, some Magic players have created fan art where they imagined what if Harry Potter or The Marvel Cinematic Universe were Magic the Gathering Cards, and its' really cool to see how a character we're all familiar with could be condensed into a single card and summarized pretty well with a single illustration, a bunch of statistics, and a few lines of flavor text.

But when he was working on making the game, Brady Dommermuth (Domer-Mewth) always had to keep in mind that Magic is not a movie or a book reversed engineered to be a game. It is a game first and foremost.

BRADY: One of the challenges for me in designing Magic worlds, and I undermine plot in story element is that I think plot and games are not friends. Your ability to self direct your ability to make the choices that you want to make your ability to explore the world how you see fit or to choose the cards for your own deck or to decide how you want to win the game through finesse or through stealth or through brute force. Those are super powerful things and plot subverts autonomy.

In fact, back the game shop, I discovered that using blue magic was a good fit for me. I was able to avoid my rash instincts and become a better strategist. And then the student because the master.

NAT: But I take 8 damage

So you're dead?

NAT: Yep, a little bit.

Laugh. WOW! So game over! Oh my God, I can't believe it! I'm definitely quitting at the tie. I'm not going for best of three.

But Magic's evolution hasn't been entirely smooth. It's hit some growing pains. More after the break.

>> BREAK

Liz Leo used to work as a graphic designer on Magic the Gathering. And this was a dream job for her -- but it also meant a lot of scrutiny.

LIZ: When I had millions of people see my expansion symbol and my first card frame design and complain about what they didn't like I had to remind myself millions of people were playing with something I designed and some will be vocal about not like it, but that just shows how much they care about the game they're playing but I can't sugar coat it either, and there are toxic players, Wizards has banned them, or at least working on their terms of service in terms of what they can do.

Now overall, Liz loves the Magic community. She even went on a Magic cruise once. But then she'll have moments like this – when she sat down to play a game at an event once.

LIZ: The guy across from me asked how I got into Magic? And I thought nice question, and I responded and told him the answer.

She first learned how to play from an all-female group called The Lady Planes Walker Society. But the guy didn't seem to care. He just said: "Huh. I didn't think girls were into Magic," and turned away.

LIZ: What a small innocuous comment, in his head he probably didn't think it was anything but I still remember it, but it made me feel wow, should I not be here? And when you're already playing a game where you have to be 100% on your A game in terms of your mind and strategy, it can be a hurdle to overcome.

As sci-fi fantasy spaces have become more inclusive, we've seen ugly backlashes from video games to Hugo book awards to Cosplay to Star Wars fandom. Magic the Gathering has not been immune to those problems.

That said, the game has gotten praise since the beginning for having diverse characters on the cards. But over time, the creative team realized they needed to be even more inclusive.

Alli Medwin is an editor and designer who works mostly in Magic's digital division. A few years ago, an intern approached her with an idea. What if they created a trans character for a new deck of cards they were working on?

ALLI: I realized this is what we want representation to look like this. This is a pretty natural flow like this is not shoehorned in. This is not tokenized this is a natural extension of already established things about this setting.

So they brought to idea to James Wyatt, who is a senior creative designer on the story team. And this turned out to a personal project for both of them. Alli is trans, although at that time, she wasn't out. As for James:

JAMES: My daughter is trans, So I said I need to write this story for her sake.

Alli and James really wanted this character, who they called Alesha, to be a fierce warrior. In fact, the card's official title is: Alesha, Who Smiles at Death.

Her flavor text reads, "Greet death with sword in hand." The illustration on the card shows Alesha in full armor, leading the charge with her army of the Mardu clan.

ALLI: One of the things in magic that that I love about our game is that we don't tend to put boob plate on our women. So you can't really tell what her physiology looks like.

James wrote her backstory for the website, and the biggest plot point they argued over was whether an antagonist should confront Alesha's identity.

JAMES: There was some sense and I've heard some people say that since the story was published that maybe it would have been better if Alesha were just accepted for who she is with no question at all. But we did end up with a character in the story who challenges her and says you're just a boy who doesn't know who he is which is a terrible awful thing to say and to my daughter it was really important that that was there because she wanted to have a character

come to realize Alicia is worth and value and identity as who she is. A funny little thing I remember discussing early on is that Alesha was a good fit for the Mardu for two reasons and one is that idea that they claim a war name and the other is the fact that they don't use blue magic because in the world of magic the gathering if you have access to Blue Magic blue is partially about transformation and so it would actually be really easy to change your identity. Change your appearance change your body and we wanted her experience to reflect better the experience of real trans people in this world without access to Blue Magic.

ALI: I'll tell you what if I had blue magic my life might have gone a little differently a lot of people's lives my gone a little differently.

JAMES: My daughter has actually designed a spell that will allow that as a permanent transition.

ALI: Nice!

When they finally put the card out there, they were nervous how the Magic community would react. But:

JAMES: There was so much positive reaction that I still cry about it.

ALI: It was it was overwhelmingly positive. You know maybe one comment in 50 was negative. The overwhelming majority overwhelming majority was positive.

The creation of Alesha also had an impact on Alli as well.

ALI: I lived what a lot of people call us stealth for a long time. That is I didn't talk about being trans. I didn't let people know. I kept it a secret without you know actively lying about it. And you know I came out about halfway through the process and it was that it was incredibly rewarding it was incredibly relieving. I without Alesha I would still probably be stealth which look I'm not going to say it doesn't work for some people because it does. But it was I felt I felt it was a burden. And Alesha was able to save me from that.

But Alesha isn't just a story. She is a card in a game – and her game mechanics are really cool. She can help you resurrect other cards that you had already used up. And that's something Alli really appreciates about Magic the Gathering: the way game mechanics inspire character development and vice versa.

ALI: It takes the design in directions that we wouldn't necessarily ever get to without the desire to figure out how to express an idea through the mechanics of the game. Like I think that I think that it would be possible to put different stories

on although I really love the stories that we've got. But if you didn't have any story on these cards you'd be missing the soul of the game really.

I came into Magic the Gathering wondering two things. Why is this card game still so popular in the age of digital games? And what is the role of world building in a card game? I realized the answers to those questions are wrapped up together. Ultimately, the reason why Magic has been so popular isn't just the story within the cards but the story that emerges when you play with those cards.

BRADY: The real story of a game is what happens to the player not the story that you designed ahead of time that it's happening to some character that the player might be playing.

Brady Dummermoth says that increasingly rare. So many video games are behaving like five-hour movies that give the player very little autonomy.

BRADY: In an era where so many games are played alone in front of your PC or in front of your console. Magic requires this community requires this human presence. It's compelling enough in its mechanics and its gameplay and systems that it wants to hold onto your brain it wants you to explore its complexities. But in order to do so you have to interface with other humans. And because of that it ends up being this naturally viral thing where if I want to see if my new deck works I'm going to have to find somebody to play it against.

So the real magic is the game is human interaction. And real world human interaction in short supply these days.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Nat Neal Ball, Mark Rosewater, Alli Medwin, James Wyatt, Brady Dommermuth (DOMER-mewth), and Liz Leo,

LIZ: Magic has some of the best fantasy art; I don't feel ashamed saying it

In fact, I asked Liz if she has a favorite card:

LIZ: I love this card called Hydra doodle, it's this hydra also a poodle and all the heads are off doing weird crazy things, the flavor text is less house broken than house breaking.

Laugh! That's good!

LIZ: It's a good card! It's really cute!

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