

A Craze For Dealing In 'Magic'; Card Game Spellbinds Adults as Well as Teens [FINAL Edition] The Washington Post (pre 1997 Fulltext) Washington, D.C. Author: Bates, Steve Date: Aug 2, 1995 Start Page: D.03 Section: METRO

Kathy Pierce operates in a world where the slightest misstep can cost a life, a place where evil assailants and powerful weapons appear at every turn. But the 22 year old software specialist from Reston laughs in the face of danger. Because, in her hands, she holds Magic.

That's "Magic: The Gathering," a card game that has cast its spell on lawyers, bank executives and other professionals, and one with a widespread appeal surpassing that which Dungeons & Dragons once had with teenage boys. An estimated 1 million people are hooked worldwide, more than a few of whom reside in the Washington area.

They can be found in places such as Destiny Comics, a comic and card shop in Fair Lakes Shopping Center in western Fairfax County. Destiny stays open late every Tuesday, providing tables where anyone with Magic cards can walk in and play free a practice common at stores across the region. Pierce is there at Destiny every week, passing through various planes of power in the game's mythical world of Dominia. Different cards represent the forests, swamps and mountains in Dominia, plus creatures and curses, and the player combatants use them in strategic combinations in a figurative fight to the death.

The object of the game, which can involve any number of players, is to destroy one's opponents through sorcerous attacks that eliminate their 20 life points.

Dozens of similar card games are sold in local stores, and new ones are released every month. There's even "Redemption," which is based on the Bible. But in the two years since Magic appeared, its popularity has made it number one. Players say part of the fun is the billions of possible combinations of the 1,500 plus cards on the market to date. All those cards have made millionaires of the folks at Wizards of the Coast, the Renton, Wash., company behind the game, which will record new sales of about \$70 million this year. It's not unusual to find a player who has spent more than \$1,000 over two years, buying everything from Scarwood Goblins to Ali From Cairo. "There's something in it for everyone," said Temis de la Pena, manager of the Compleat Strategist game shop in Falls Church, who conceded that he is "into Magic for a lot more money than I'd like to be." Pierce constantly adds to her deck, to the tune of hundreds of dollars a year, to obtain choice cards to strengthen her playing powers. She enjoys watching the faces of her opponents as she flips over a Shivan Dragon to vaporize an adversary's Mesa Pegasus. The competition is "like life in a way. But you don't have this much control over life," she said.

Some devotees only collect and trade their cards, much like children do with sports or comic cards. Businessman Bill Jaffe, 46, of McLean, buys and sells his as a way of subsidizing the escalating cost of his collection.

"It definitely has attracted the best and brightest," he said.

Fans who try to explain Magic to friends and coworkers often receive strange reactions. "Some of them looked at me like I was insane," conceded Jenny Dieffenbach, of Waldorf. The cards, which feature fantasy art and occasional quotes from Shakespeare or Coleridge, have been condemned as satanic in some rural parts of the country. Men still constitute the majority of Magic collectors and players, according to area dealers, but women are catching up. Dieffenbach has set up Magic leagues in her community. She lacks only Time Walk, an out of print card valued at \$100, to have one of every Magic card available. At the moment, her collection's value is close to \$10,000, according to the price guides. It includes the extremely rare Black Lotus, which currently goes for as much as \$300. However, don't try buying her out of the game. "I will never sell any of my cards. I don't care what they're worth," said Dieffenbach, 31, a bank employee. "I'll be playing when I'm 100 if I can find someone to play with."

Jonathan Mullen, of Fairfax, started playing Magic in 1993, a few months after the first cards hit store shelves and prices began their dizzying upward spiral. The 14 year old said his parents don't really mind the game or its cost: "If I wasn't spending it on Magic, I'd be spending it on comics."

His strategy is simple, he explained Tuesday night at Destiny. "I just attack," he said.

It was the usual evening scene at the Fairfax store. Kathy Pierce was challenging her older sister, Karen, and the store owner, Tae Yi, and kept attacking so relentlessly that he had little time for his customers. Meanwhile, Jonathan and five others were dueling at an adjacent table as groans and triumphant shouts resounded. Said corporate auditor Sean Lindsay, 32, of Sterling, "This is better than watching TV."

Illustration

PHOTO, Gerald Martineau CAPTION: A hand of 'Magic' cards. In all, there are more than 1,500 of them on the market to date. A game of "Magic: The Gathering" at Destiny Comics in western Fairfax County. Karen and her sister, Kathy, frequent Destiny, which stays open late every Tuesday for players.
Credit: Washington Post Staff Writer