Playing With Time: Memory and Nostalgia in *Magic: the Gathering* Communities

Kyle Medlock
Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research
Griffith University
170 Kessels Road
Nathan, 4111, Queensland, Australia
kyle.medlock@griffithuni.edu.au

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BODY TEXT

This paper highlights ongoing research examining the work of nostalgia in the experiences of Australian consumers of the popular trading card game *Magic: the Gathering* (Wizards of the Coast 1993) (MTG). The research aims to elucidate the role of nostalgia in influencing both practices of participation in MTG communities and player association with the game more broadly. In addition, it seeks to illuminate the corporate practices implemented by the game's creators at USA-based developer Wizards of the Coast (WotC) that work to capitalise on player nostalgia for profit, and how these affect the players themselves. Primarily, this research draws from qualitative semi-structured interviews with twenty engaged MTG players located in Australia. Specifically, 'engaged' refers to players who have participated in MTG events and games for a minimum of twelve months prior to the interview. Additionally, participants were asked to supply one or more photographs of MTG-related items that they associated with either nostalgia, sentimentality or important memories. These form both elucidation points during discussion and as additional data to capture the materiality and variance of players' nostalgia.

MTG, produced by WotC - the developers of critically acclaimed tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* - has an estimated 40 million regular players worldwide as of 2023 (Jones 2023). Players combine specifically designed MTG cards into decks of 60 or more and use them to compete in head-to-head or multiplayer games which involve a mixture of strategic and chance-based gameplay. Games of MTG evoke comparisons with chess and go in terms of strategic decision-making, and with poker for the shared utilisation of imperfect information and randomisation as key aspects of gameplay. New cards for play are released bi-monthly in themed sets of 300 or more, which are sold to players in randomised "booster packs" and pre-constructed decks through specialised retailers. These modes of distribution have resulted in the total number of individual playable cards for players to choose from burgeoning from a debut 293 to over 26,000 as of late 2023. As such, the number of possible permutations of players' decks and game outcomes

approaches infinity, making every game unique and providing players with a virtually infinite playground of potential combinations. However, MTG products are usually only available on shelves for less than a year before being replaced by the newest releases – whereupon players must engage with a secondary market should they wish to acquire cards they did not acquire from packs, or those from sets prior to their entry into the hobby. This limits player agency by the extent of their financial capital. Furthermore, set-specific gameplay and the experience of taking part in MTG's community during the lifecycle of a specific set, can never be reclaimed and thus become objects of nostalgic retrospection.

As a result of both MTG's game rules as well as these methods of game piece distribution, MTG exists as a game heavily defined by change and asymmetrical access to game pieces based on factors of financial, temporal and spatial origin. This forms a unique environment of leisure that exists in a continual state of change, within which the passage of time is felt keenly by players. While new chess gambits may be discovered, or new bluffing strategies for games such as poker may influence future tournaments, few games exist that embody change in both form and extent to the degree of MTG. And like the wider societies in which MTG is played, such a rapid pace of change leaves a mark – not only on the memories and nostalgic reminiscing of its members, but in the ways that these individuals and their communities of play approach the future based on these remains of the past. As such, MTG provides a lucrative opportunity for illuminating how nostalgia functions within this unique cultural context of tabletop gaming.

Drawing on Svetlana Boym's (2001) dichotomy of restorative and reflective nostalgias as a foundational framework, this research not only works towards improving academic knowledge of MTG communities and their members, but also contributes to the burgeoning academic literature on nostalgia and its important place in contemporary consumer culture. Furthermore, as contemporary experiences of tabletop gaming continue to integrate with digital technologies, the study of MTG and nostalgia are becoming all the more important in offering comparative and novel insights into not only digital transitions and their subsequent development of nostalgia, but also in highlighting experiences of nostalgia within analog gameplay. Thus, this environment provides an excellent case study for examining the propagation of nostalgia in contemporary life, as well as the ways in which the rapid production and obsoletism of cultural objects influences conceptualisations of time in an increasingly ephemeral and fast-paced modern world of post-industrial consumerist economies.

REFERENCES

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