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Friday Night Magic the Gathering

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Tonight is Friday Night Magic, and these are dress shirt and tie. "ROUND STARTS!"

In the game room, rules are being drawn. And sixteen players stand at the ready. "FNM players!" calls out a man in a dress shirt and tie. "ROUND STARTS!"

Tonight is Friday Night Magic, and these are Planeswalkers, navigating the multiverse with a team of creatures, spells and enchantments of various colors and abilities. They might be Liliana Vess, exercising the dark art of necromancy – or elder dragon Nicol Bolas, shattering minds with the power of touch.

It’s vanquish or be vanquished in Magic: The Gathering—not a game for the faint of heart.

Garfield and published by prominent game publisher Wizards of the Coast, Magic was designed to attract lovers of the classic role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons while incorporating the strategy of chess.

In the game, each player uses a 60-card deck full of mythical creatures and sorcery to protect their 20 life points. The game’s outcome depends both on the skill of the player and the strength of the cards, which are used to give and take lives, release creatures and cast curses.

Friday Night Magic tournaments are held every Friday in comic and game stores across the globe. The event is meant to introduce new players to the game, as well as prepare seasoned players for more strict tournaments on a national and international level. Winners of FNM are awarded with foil cards released every month as a promotion for the game.

This year, Magic turns 21 years old—just like many of its players.

"Usually if someone asks what Magic is, I tell them it’s like the original collectable card game," says Bob Cohoon, junior in electrical engineering. "It’s like Pokémon, but Magic was first."

Cohoon (who many might recognize as the creator of the popular Iowa State Secret
Magic can be played in two different ways, Cohoon explains. One form, called constructed, is played using a deck of the player’s creation, and he or she can bring their best decks to tournaments. The limited style, however, involves players selecting cards from chosen packs at the tournament, with no knowledge of the cards beforehand.

To build his deck, Cohoon says he has invested “easily $10,000.” After all, powerful cards can cost hundreds – even thousands – of dollars by themselves. The game tends to be expensive for players who want to attend more competitive tournaments.

“People are here to have fun, and they don’t take it that seriously,” says Chris Tasler, who has worked at Mayhem for almost 10 years. “We try and build an atmosphere where it’s hanging out with your friends and having a good time.”

But at Friday Night Magic, games aren’t quite so competitive.

For Magic players, the atmosphere is what draws them to Mayhem on Friday nights. Students starting at Iowa State are used to playing at home, Tasler says, so they’re looking for the “Magic scene” in Ames.

“I don’t know if I could count all of the potential students who come [to Mayhem] and say, ‘Hey, I found this cool store, and I want to go here,’” Tasler says.

John Cornelius, a senior in computer engineering, says friends from Friley Hall brought him to Mayhem to learn the game his freshman year.

“I just find it fun,” Cornelius says. He’s only played in one competitive event, where he “lost terribly.” But it didn’t really matter. Cornelius stuck around for five more hours, playing games with other Magic enthusiasts, and meeting new people. And he has been a regular at Friday Night Magic ever since.

Cornelius considers himself “so-so” as a Magic player, but he is clearly passionate about the game.

He flips through a binder of cards to reveal Dungrove Elder, a “hexproof” tree creature from the green deck. It’s foil and full art, he explains.

“It’s my favorite card ever made,” Cornelius says. “I’ve had times where it killed people. It was absolutely hilarious. He’s not legal in standard anymore.”

“I’ve made tons of friends. For some reason, you guys still like me.”

Nearby players laugh as Justin Sliekers proclaims his dedication to the game. He runs his bright red tie through his fingers as he talks.

“I was just one of the few kids who never sold all of his cards after high school,” Sliekers says. Sliekers got into Magic in seventh grade, “the budding age of fantasy nerdy shit.” He understood the deep interactions between the cards, and the parallels between Magic and chess were fascinating to him.

Nineteen years later, at age 31, Sliekers runs Friday Night Magic. He registers every player into the system, starts and stops the tournament rounds and distributes various prizes. But this is only his Friday night job. By day, Sliekers is a consultant for a software development company with a wife and two young kids.

“The oldest plays [Magic] with me, and my wife does sometimes,” Sliekers laughs. “She thinks it’s cute that I’m so enamored with a children’s card game. And thank God she thinks that shit’s cute.”

A member of the Army National Guard for nine years, Sliekers spent all of 2004 in Kuwait during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Sliekers was the IT guy for the 42-person unit, making sure that the network never went down.

Magic: The Gathering was his outlet, a way to spend his time off overseas, to “relax, de-stress and play some cards.”

“That’s Adam West. 1966 Batman.”

Robert Josephson is one of the owners of Mayhem Comics and Games. He has managed the Ames store for nearly 25 years. Magic: The Gathering, he says, has significantly improved business.

“There’s something fun about opening a pack and getting a 50 dollar card in a pack,” Josephson says. “It’s very addictive.”

Perhaps this is why Magic is sometimes referred to as “cardboard crack,” but the game is popular for another important reason, as well.

“It’s a great way to bond with people you don’t know,” he says. “Even if you don’t speak English, no matter where you come from, if you can play Magic: The Gathering, you have a connection.”

On a TV in the middle of the store, Penguin is threatening to turn several world leaders to dust with a contraption called the “dehydorator,” and two men in tights are on their way.

Friday Night Magic has gained serious popularity since the game’s creation, two decades ago.

“There is something to be said about having some place to go every Friday night. A lot of people have struck up great friendships because of this game. Magic was their common denominator.”

The hierarchy of Magic competitions is complicated. But basically, players at Mayhem can participate in a local, pre-Pro Tour Qualifier. Winners go to Pro Tour Qualifiers, and from there, top players move on to Pro Tours. The Grand Prix is the largest tournament in Magic, featuring the best players in the world while also being open to the public.

“If you can win at the local level, you get a shot at the world level,” Josephson says. “Sometimes Paris, Japan. Tens of thousands of dollars in cash.”

“You could be a 15-year-old and go to an event in Lincoln, Nebraska and suddenly win and play in the Louvre. You could play in the Louvre with the people you idolize.”
During his years studying political science at Iowa State, Council Bluffs native Kevin Lo was an avid Magic player. He and his friends would play an entire tournament at Mayhem and continue playing until the early hours of the morning.

Lo played with the best of them.

“Like Brandon Scheel,” Lo says.

Scheel, who was originally from Ames, attended almost every single Pro Tour Qualifier, and he placed in the top 10 in every Pro Tour one year, making roughly 30,000 dollars. Scheel even worked with Wizards of the Coast’s Vice President of digital gaming, Randy Buehler in New York.

“We had always referred to him as the end boss,” Lo says, “because we had to beat him if we ever wanted to win. He was always there.”

Then there was Gerry Thompson, who won two Grand Prix tournaments and a Pro Tour Top 8 in 2013. Thompson now writes for StarCity Games, the largest Magic retailer in the world.

“This game has got me through a large portion of the middle of my life;” Lo says. He started playing the game at 13 and made it to the top eight in the Pro Tour Qualifiers at age 16. He’s competed in Pro Tours on every continent except Antarctica.

“When I was playing professionally, it was a job,” Lo says. “It’s all a race to the top.”

Lo sits across from several other young men in the game room of Mayhem, carefully sliding cards into protective sleeves. Building a successful deck, he says, is a highly debated topic in the Magic community.

“Some decks kill creatures, some decks put a certain amount of cards together that helps you win the game. How do you build your deck to be the best it can be?”

All magic in the game requires Mana, the energy that fuels spells, Lo explains. Mana is found in the land, which is represented by five colors: white, plains; blue, islands; black, swamps; red, mountains; and green, forests. And each color comes with certain characteristics.

“I’m a blue player,” Lo says. “The color of drawing cards, the color of instants, the color of making the game long. Essentially, the color of hidden information.”

Lo doesn’t compete at large competitions anymore. He doesn’t have the time or energy to commit to the game, but he plans on spending time mentoring new players.

Lo gestures at the room full of Magic players, setting up their decks and preparing for Friday Night Magic. In order for the game to progress, Lo says, “this needs to happen.”

Despite the large turnout for Friday Night Magic, as well as other Magic events throughout the week, Josephson says he hopes to see more women playing the game.

For every 20 males, only one or two females will participate in the tournaments. “Nerds are not just guys. Nerds are girls, too,” he says.

Tonight, out of the 16 FNM players, 24-year-old Becca Renfer is the only female.

“A lot of my friends were playing it, and I felt left out if I didn’t,” Renfer says. “I’m a competitive person, and I was pretty much down to show off my skill.”

Renfer sits across from her boyfriend at one of the long tables in the game room of Mayhem, sifting through her deck and laying out cards. Even though the Friday night tournaments aren’t highly competitive, as one of the few females, she wants to do well.

“It feels a little like the pressure’s on, especially in a tournament,” Renfer says. She feels the constant need to prove herself, but fortunately at Mayhem, Renfer says, “it’s all for fun in the end.”

The Cedar Rapids native has been playing for over a year, but she wishes more women would attend the Friday tournament.

“All of my female friends, I say they should get into Magic,” Renfer says, “I have Magic friends, and then I have regular people friends. I always want to bring new people.”

Sure, there’s a “nerd” stereotype that comes along with this male-dominated card game. Bad hygiene, neck beards, you name it.

But Kevin M., a music teacher at North Polk High School, just laughs. “Revenge of the Nerds is way over,” he says. “This is a social life for way more people.”

Kevin runs a Magic club for North Polk students after school hours. It’s a learning experience for high schoolers, a way for them to combine games like poker and chess into an engaging, fantasy experience.

“I want them to learn to interact with each other,” Kevin says. “It’s an important aspect of life, learn to make good decisions, not just in games – but for life.”

Sometimes guys can even pick up chicks while playing Magic, Kevin adds.

Did he?

Kevin laughs.

“God, no.” 😆