

ABRACADABRA

IT'S A MAGICAL LAND, BUT IT SURE ISN'T OZ. It's Dominia — and ruby slippers and good witches offer no solace when playing Magic: The Gathering.

Invented by Richard Garfield, a former mathematics professor at Whitman College in Washington, Magic is a role-playing fantasy game à la Dungeons and Dragons that uses poker-deck-sized playing cards to cast spells, summon creatures and conquer lands.

OFFBEAT

"Magic combines the natural fun of playing a game with the collectability aspect," says Paul Nobles, who organizes Magic tournaments out of his hobby shop in Minneapolis.

The combination was intentional, says Carrie Thearle, marketing director for Wizards of the Coast, which sells the game. The colorful cards, bearing images of scaly dragons, lush landscapes and wizards were designed by several artists to give each a unique quality.

Originally targeted at college students, interest in the game has expanded to include people of all ages. Magic is now so popular that Wizards of the Coast is able to deliver only one-tenth of the 900 million decks of cards ordered.

"It's brought a lot of new people into game and hobby shops," says U. of Minnesota senior John Stephenson, manager of Phoenix Games. "I've taught more than 150 people to play."

Players can acquire cards and build their decks by trading or betting on the game's outcome. "I usually don't [bet my cards], because it's so random," says U. of Iowa senior Doug Carlson. "[To bet], you just pick a card from your deck—it could be anything."

Players say Magic offers the chance to think strategically, pass the time — even take on a new personality.

"I've got a real thing for goblins," says Bryan Von Donslear, a U. of Iowa grad student. "I get together with friends, and I have this desire to utterly destroy them."

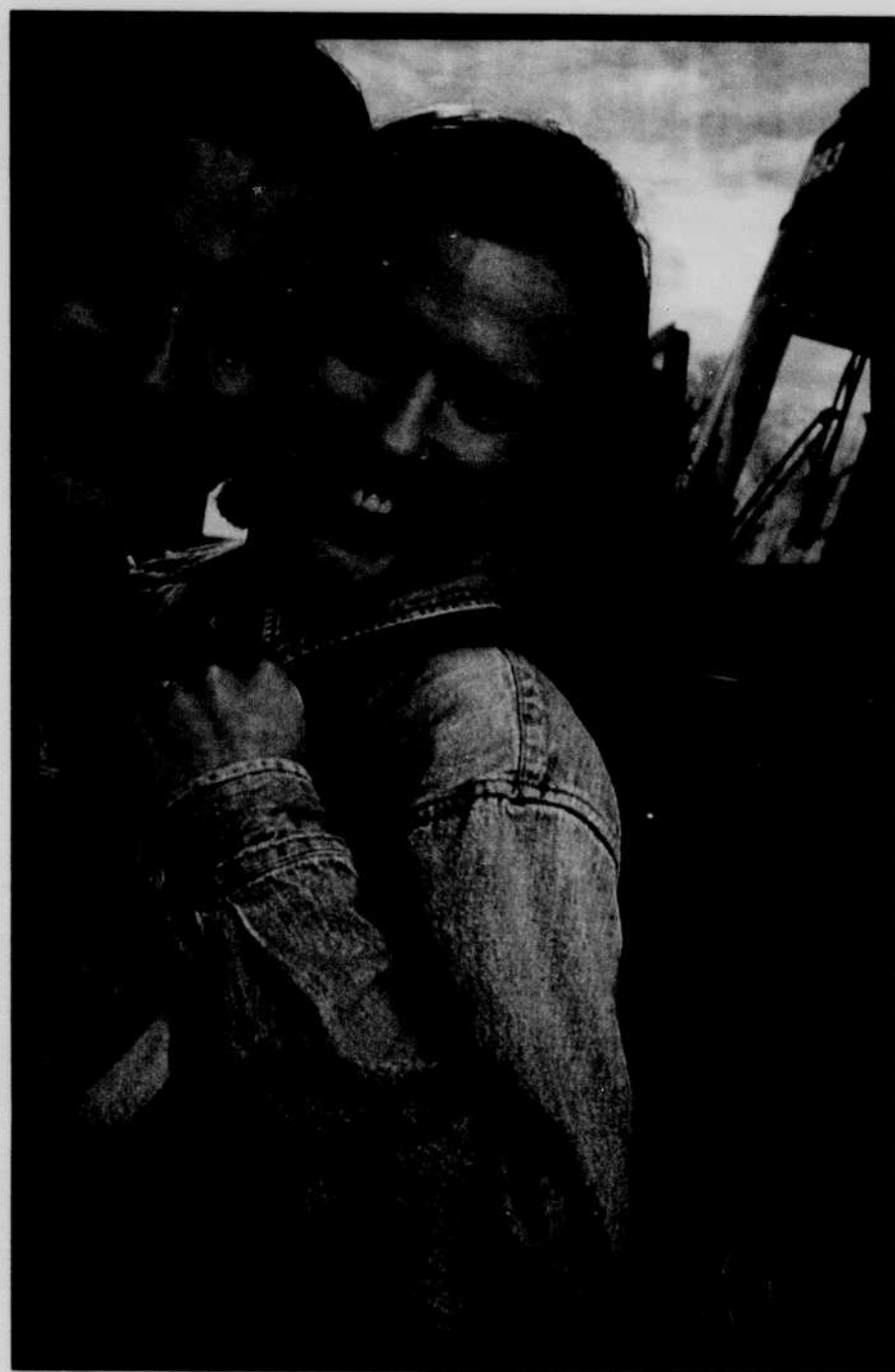
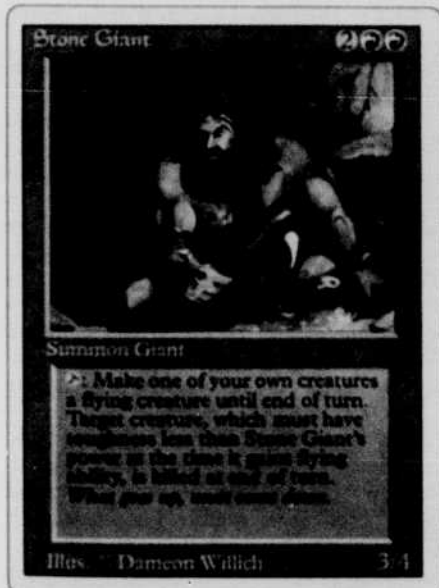
Starter decks for Magic retail for \$8. Booster packs, which can add the card needed to conquer the world, cost between \$1.50 and \$3.

The game, with all of its twists, turns and infinite possibilities, has hooked enough players to create a \$175 million-per-year business. It also seems to have cast a spell over some of its fans.

"We limit the amount [of Magic decks] that people can buy in one day," Stephenson says. "They were getting overly hooked — so into the game that they would use their food money to buy Magic."

U. of Iowa senior Mike Niemeyer insists that there are more harmful addictions. "It's better than drinking," he says. "At least you can play all night and still be OK when you wake up."

Devon Alexander, U. of Iowa



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