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Symposium

The birth of a community, the death of the win: Player production of the *Middle-earth Collectible Card Game*

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Collectible card games (CCGs) are at the midpoint of the spectrum of gameplaying: half game, half story. An examination of a CCG based on Tolkien's Middle-earth illustrates the ways in which fans of the story have changed the game, especially in removing the focus on winning.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Audience analysis; CCG; Fan community; MECCG; J. R. R. Tolkien

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1. Introduction: Breaking the rules of the game

[1.1] It is easy to think of tabletop games as boxes. They appear as boxes when they are play tested by companies, then mass-produced for toy store shelves, their sides bursting with commissioned art, fantastic descriptions, and clever rules sets. But what happens to the game inside the box when the company that made the box is gone?

[1.2] As the four-time North American champion of the *Middle-earth Collectible Card Game,* and one of the lead members of the players committee that has maintained the game since the demise of its parent company, I am responsible for helping to manage rules discussions, publish fan newsletters, and organize tournaments in dozens of countries throughout "real-earth." I have seen the impact of the fan gaming community on keeping a game alive—how even the way the game itself is played changes once the box is ripped off and never put back on.

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2. Collectible card games and the Tolkien fan community

[2.1] In August 1993, Wizards of the Coast published the first collectible card game, called *Magic: The Gathering.* It was no ordinary playing card game, but rather an altogether new game medium dubbed the customizable card game, trading card game, or collectible card game (CCG). Soon CCG after CCG started coming out, and

"everything changed; all of a sudden these games were no longer a small niche for the serious gamer with lots of time on their hands, but something you could play with relatively normal people" (Farrell n.d.). Following suit in December 1995, Iron Crown Enterprises created the *Middle-earth Collectible Card Game* (MECCG), which, unlike *Magic*'s "generic medieval" universe, translated the specific literary world of J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth, including *The Hobbit,* the Lord of the Rings book series, and the *Unfinished Tales,* into an exploration and acquisition-based strategy game. In roughly hundred-card expansion sets intermittently released over 4 years, 1,700 cards were designed, and given drawings and game text in over eight languages. Similar to miniatures war games, players could select from this vast card inventory to tailor a 60-card deck to use in competition against other players' decks in matches lasting 1 to 2 hours. Iron Crown's MECCG won the Best CCG of 1995 Origins Award and was regarded as a work of art in games by many players. Chris Farrell has given it the impressive "third greatest game of all time" rank on boardgamegeek.com (note 1). In other words, the fans loved it.

[2.2] However, disaster soon stuck. In 1999, Iron Crown Enterprises ran into financial troubles, lost the game license from the Tolkien estate, and ceased production and support. Hundreds of players, faced with the loss of organized play and prizes, abandoned the game. This should have been the death knell that marked the end of MECCG. But it wasn't: from all over the world, fans came out of the woodwork to save their work of art. In so doing, they used the now-traditional means applied to dead hobbies to keep the game alive, such as online discussion forums, but even more interestingly, they also used some untraditional ones.

[2.3] But first, just what kind of fans are we talking about? MECCG appealed primarily to readers of Tolkien, many of whom, because of the game's unusually complex strategy, as well as the painstaking care that went into translating Tolkien's fantasy trilogy into card game terms and matching artwork, were mature, adoring fans between the ages of 30 and 50. An example of such artwork would be the fiery anthromorphization of a godlike female sky spirit closing the "Doors of Night" (figure 1). This card, played to enhance creature and environment strategies in the game, represents the danger of nighttime in Tolkien's stories. In his article on MECCG collecting, Wolfgang Penetsdorfer commented on this community of dilettantes: "The typical MECCG player is not only enjoying the game but is also a collector of the wonderful cards. Thanks to the great artwork its [sic] really a wonderful feeling sitting at home in front of a fireplace, taking the binder and looking at Cirdan thinking 'Ah, yes! That's exactly how an old and wise Elf should look like.' As a fan of Tolkien's stories I loved it to finally get a face to some of the characters" (Penetsdorfer 2006:14–15). Many of these older fan players, whose later efforts would change the

entire culture of the game, had never participated in a gaming or tournament community before. Now, for love of Tolkien, they were doing so.

Figure 1. *The Doors of Night card from the Middle-earth Collectible Card Game by Iron Crown Enterprises. [View larger image.]*

[2.4] The enjoyment of the older fans was also due to the uniqueness of the collectible card game format, a format that allowed MECCG to pull from both the "abstract gamer" and "story gamer" types. Imagine a spectrum that measures to what degree a game is purely representational and to what degree it is a story. An abstract game like *Go* would be on the far left (at 1) of this spectrum, and a role-playing game like *Dungeons & Dragons* would be on the far right (at 9). In this spectrum, CCGs would score a perfect 5: half game, half story.

[2.5] These older "story fans" were probably not as interested in their CCG's gamelike elements, such as the directly competitive two-player style. This head-to-head style is less present in the cooperative party atmosphere of role-playing story games, and a CCG's rigid rules adherence is unlike the looseness of RPG "guidelines." (A Tolkien RPG was available at the time; however, like all RPGs, it required a time commitment beyond what "normal" people had available.) Moreover, even the story aspect of CCGs must have felt oddly gamelike to these fans, since players inhabit preexisting storybook worlds with named towns, monsters, and other elements, and cannot create new characters from outside the original tale. These limitations

eventually led RPG players to dismiss CCGs as less imaginative because the cards were like premade stories. Yet story fans and other types (players who love game elements or a little bit of both game and story) enjoy CCGs for precisely those reasons: the cards function as storyboards that give a rules-based grammar to work with, making the CCG feel more like a controlled adventure game than a boundless role-playing module.

[2.6] Also, the delights of story immersion—the only quality that can lead to gamer identification—are not completely lost in CCGs, as they are in *Go* or chess (yes, even playing with a *Simpsons* chess set). Though CCG cards are premade, players have the power to edit their own unique deck of 60 cards, a process that can be compared to writing one's own dramatic television script for an established series. The whole business of playing a CCG can feel quite personal: Will your party of anachronistic Balin-led dwarves leave a defeated Balrog behind in Moria to roam Dragon Country? Will Aragorn, rather than Frodo, use force of arms to destroy the One Ring?

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3. Life after licensing: Player production

[3.1] I believe it is this flexible quality of self-identification in the fans, combined with new coteries of casual players, that kept interest in MECCG going after the other main reason for playing vanished: tournament-level competition. Though tournaments continued to be maintained by the players committee, they had nowhere near the level of support as when a whole business stood behind the effort, with paid employees running regular monthly tournaments and awarding loot in the form of card sets and foreign trips. The greater tournament scene died, and those who were in it only for the scene left. In other words, MECCG became less of a tournament game and more of a casual game, something to be pulled out of the closet after eating Chinese food or pizza with friends. Ironically, MECCG was now fulfilling more of its promised CCG qualities of being played with "relatively normal people," rather than "serious gamers."

[3.2] Given the increase in normal people playing the game, the fan player community realized that new methods for game tournaments and gatherings must be created. One of the first inventions was free online software that allowed anyone to play, but online play wasn't enough. The mature players clamored for face-to-face social interaction, not the watered-down sterility of online gaming.

[3.3] The player community organizers slowly adapted, taking different approaches to the tournaments, such as focusing on beginner-level events where cards were often provided. A massive MECCG annual gaming convention in Germany was organized, called "Lure of Middle-earth," which often drew over a hundred players from around the world. Players could participate in low-stakes events with few or no prizes, play

unofficial fan variants and pickup games, or just spectate and join in the after-party drinking binges. In contrast, the national-level qualifier and finals tournaments in every country, most notably in the United States, where Iron Crown Enterprises was based, plummeted in attendance; even the annual world-level tournament decreased in size. In light of these depressing figures, I recently wrote a letter recommending that the world tournament be scrapped and replaced with informal MECCG play and sightseeing events because too many players have reported not wanting to sign up for events where they would just get pummeled—they simply want to have a good time. The fans had spoken out to their democratically elected fan leaders.

[3.4] Additionally, the more committed player fans began to actively reconstruct the pieces and rules of the game to meet their avid fan needs. There is now a committee to create more "virtual cards" for the game online (see http://www.councilofelrond.org/index.php?id=11#Virtual%20Cards), though such cards could never be physically printed for copyright reasons. Nicolai Willinek, for example, spent years inventing more than 500 dream cards because he believed there were still parts of Tolkien's story begging to be represented in the game. He wrote, "If it had been left to the die-hard dream-card fan community, [the never-made card] 'Theodred' would have had his chance while ICE [Iron Crown Enterprises] was still around. Sadly though, as ICE had their licence [sic] for Middleearth stolen from their hands, it is left upon us to further this game in a matter that fits most" (Willinek 2007:17–18). Now these new cards are enjoyed by many players, all for free, and all thanks to the dedication of players like Nicolai.

[3.5] In a surprising twist, many players, though they love the game's community, rarely enjoy playing the game anymore. Instead, they concentrate on collecting the cards, talking about the cards in newsletters, or inventing their own card concepts, which they see as having a greater creative thrill than merely playing the game. Needless to say, if the company were still making the game, the fan producers of these new cards and casual scenarios would not have such an eager audience. Loss of the company has resulted in greater control of the game by its fans.

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4. The death of the win

[4.1] The change that I consider most profound of all, however, is that the goal of playing has altered. Without corporate production, the pool of players and the arenas for playing have shrunk to the point that competitive players are forced to consider quality of opponent. Whether they enter a real tournament or one of the new low-stakes side events, they are likely to be matched up with someone who is *not* concerned with winning.

[4.2] In consequence, it is becoming more and more obvious to the fans that the win should be removed as the focus of games. Competitive players also were discovering something else disturbing: a few fans did not view their victories as important but only incidental. These players, myself included, needed to find new reasons to keep playing.

[4.3] This seismic shift in the community calls attention to an overlooked aspect of games: what does it mean to "win," anyway? This question, which should be equally troubling to any fan who enjoys watching tournament-level sports, has made me think about what a win means in any game I pick up and play. For example, I've never confused my living room victories in the game of *Diplomacy* over my six friends (who are really just waiting for me to break out the chocolate cake so they can go home) with national-level competition, but it has always given me a thrill to outperform them. Should it?

[4.4] Sometimes winning is due to the quality of the opponent, sometimes it's skill, and sometimes it's just dumb luck. But in most cases where I've played games, winning felt personal. Sometimes I've played superbly, by which I mean the platonic ideal of a perfect game, but I've still ended up losing the match, which made me feel bad about the whole experience. The win, like a test score, is a difficult-to-reject assessment of self-worth.

[4.5] What does a win mean in a small tournament field like the field of casual gaming? I am going to offer a strange answer to that question: it means anything you like. Such an answer can work, can even be quite profound, because the answer doesn't work at all—it offers no easy validation—unless every winner individually assesses himself or herself on the skill components desired to be tested. This is what happened to me on an unconscious level. When I no longer had regular tournaments to look forward to but only friendly gaming evenings, I realized that I was taking on rather odd player mannerisms, such an handicapping myself (by stopping myself from making crushing plays), taking the time to compliment my opponent's successes, and not minding if I lost—a shocking idea to some, but old hat to the casual player who is just having fun. Of course, I still experienced a competitive feeling of self-critique that made me want to improve my skills next time, but the locus of this feeling had changed: I was competing against myself, against my own ideas of what a good player should be. Needless to say, taking the game's outcome less personally made me not only a better player in the long run, but a much nicer one to boot. Also obvious to me now was something I should have long known. This is how the average, noncompetitive person already plays games.

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5. A better playing experience

[5.1] After the death of my competitive side, it did not take long for me to come to a final, balmy realization: casual gaming should have as its end goal the creation of better playing experiences. This is especially imperative in a game community where players are leaving in droves, fed up with the competitive atmosphere that a game's marketing company has created. The loss of a game's company can also be a strength. The players who remain are loyal, and so loving that they count it a blessing if they can play a game they adore in the 3-hour-a-week leftovers after work, family, and a semblance of a social life. In the case of MECCG, the fan community is no longer limited by the binaries of winner/loser play that the parent company naturally supported or by the pumped-out product that was sometimes a bit too hasty and imperfect as a result of a capitalist survival plan of making money. We fans are just beginning to realize how much power we have to reform the game exactly the way we want it—more relaxed and more fun.

[5.2] Whether they are using individual house rules or online forum variants, fan gaming communities operate the same way that fan fiction extends literature or film: fans take control of the material, play with it, and own it in new ways. But rather than using the techniques of fiction writing, gamers use the techniques of game creation. Such communities seem a natural extension of what James Gee (2007), who has written extensively about the learning principles any good game will utilize, calls player "production" of the game, the process that players use to create their own scenarios, rules, and game modifications. Gee demonstrates how player production is one of the most important tools for learning and game enjoyment; I am certain the fans would agree.

[5.3] Speaking of fans as producers, a friend of mine recently argued that massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) like *Dark Age of Camelot,* no matter how well crafted, will only succeed in the long run if the designers allow more player input into the games' direction, including letting the players create their own modules. Perhaps game companies can tap this pool of creativity more by constructing an original game engine to place in the fans' hands, then backing off and seeing where the fans run with it. (*Neverwinter Nights* comes to mind, as do open-source operating systems.) Many companies already see the power of employing fans and are using beta testers who are fans and tournament organizers who are fans. They have realized that fans are the most committed (and cheapest!) workers of all. Fans reshape and perfect their games, not just out of fandom sentiment but because they are the producers too; and in their own way, regardless of the presence of the parent, they will always fight to keep their ideas alive.

[5.4] So perhaps my friend is incorrect. Even if the creators of *Dark Age of Camelot* isolate their player base until the company is finally forced to abandon the game, I do

not think that will spell the end. The fans will step in.

6. Note

1. Chris Farrell, item 3, Middle Earth CCG, GeekList: Chris' All-Time Top 20, http://www.boardgamegeek.com/geeklist/18/item/170#item170. The 1995 Origins Award winners can be found at http://www.originsgamefair.com/awards/1995.

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