

The Home Forum®

The card game that started it all

WALK into most toy stores nowadays, and trading-card games are easy to find. If a new adventure movie for kids is in theaters, count on a new trading-card game in stores soon.

But that wasn't always the case. Just 10 years ago, trading-card games didn't even exist!

The origin of the trading-card industry can be traced to "Magic: The Gathering." Magic was the first game in which cards with characters having different powers face-off against one another.

Since its debut in 1993, Magic has gotten very popular. Its producer, Wizards of the Coast (in Renton, Wash.), has created 6,000 kinds of cards. More than 7 million people have played Magic at more than 100,000 official tournaments.

Richard Garfield, the Seattle-based game consultant who invented Magic, got the idea by fiddling with games like chess and Monopoly.

"At a certain point," Mr. Garfield says in an e-mail interview, "it hit me that the modification of the game could be the game itself. From there it is a short leap to a game where each person chooses which cards he is going to play from a vast pool of cards - creating, in a sense, their own game."

In traditional games, Garfield says, the action is limited by what is in the cards and on the board. He says trading-card games generally (and Magic in particular, of course) have attracted millions of fans because the game can take many paths.

"Players of trading card games enjoy the boundlessness of the experience," Garfield says. "Each player has a unique part of the game, so that each player you play brings you surprises and teaches you more."

Unlike many trading-card games, success in Magic does not require a player to buy expensive rare cards. Common cards, Garfield says, have a lot of power. Rare cards are more complex and unusual, but not necessarily more powerful.

But when it comes to cost, parents and kids should consider the value of trading-card games, Garfield says. He considers the games to be a "mental sport," so to him it's OK if families spend as much money on these games as they do on sports.

GARFIELD'S goal, he says, was to make a great game, not just something to get people interested in other products.

"Magic is not driven by books, or movies, or TV, or video games," Garfield says. "It is my hope that Magic is, like a very few games such as Scrabble or chess, timeless." (But if he could do it all over, he says, he would have been interested in having a Magic TV show and film.)

Yes, Garfield plays Magic, among many other games. "I like board games, card games, computer games ... traditional games, role-playing games, physical games (like Jenga and darts), party games," he says. "I am sure there are other categories I am missing, but you get the picture."

N.C.P.

YOU MAY KNOW THE CARD GAME. BUT DO YOU KNOW THE 'SELLING-TO-KIDS GAME' THAT IS PART OF IT?



PORTRAITS OF CONCENTRATION: Mary Dimauro (l.) was the only girl at the Danvers, Mass., Yu-Gi-Oh tournament last month. (Below, l. to r.) Robert and Adam Michaud watch their older brother Zachary compete. (Far l.) Kyle Amirault has a nail-biting moment.

PHOTOS BY MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN - STAFF



WHEN KYLE AMIRAULT threw one of his favorite cards, Barrel Dragon, onto the table, he knew he was nearing victory.

The 12-year-old from Lynnfield, Mass., had played dozens of Yu-Gi-Oh games over the past six months. Barrel Dragon, a rare card with high

attack points, rarely let him down.

Kyle picked up a quarter on the table.

To win the game, the coin would need to land on heads two out of three times. Kyle spun the quarter like a silver top. First roll, heads. Second roll, tails. On the third roll, the coin broke its tight spiral and teetered left and right like a seesaw.

Finally, it stopped. Heads. Kyle had survived the first round. "The way you win is with good cards," says Kyle, a bright-looking boy with closely cropped hair.

Now all Kyle had to do was find the perfect card to play - for three more rounds after this.

Here in the Liberty Tree Mall in Danvers, Mass., north of Boston, more than 100 children and teenagers had gathered to play in what is quickly becoming a major event in kid culture: Yu-Gi-Oh trading-card tournaments.

Each week, mostly on Saturdays, kids gather in malls like this one, or in stores that sell board games and magic tricks, to play Yu-Gi-Oh.

The cards, sold by Upper Deck (of baseball-card fame), first came to the United States about a year ago. The game has gotten hugely popular.

But trading cards are only part of Yu-Gi-Oh. A lot of you reading this already know about it because of the Saturday morning cartoon or the video game. You



Yu-Gi-Oh!

might also have seen a picture of Yu-Gi, the cartoon's main character, on T-shirts, key chains, and puzzles.

You may get the feeling that you've seen ideas like this before. Remember Pokémon? That also was a trading-card game, a cartoon, and a toy.

What about Star Wars? It started as a movie, but now it includes card games and merchandise. Even books, like the Harry Potter series, follow this pattern.

One idea, many many products

For the past 10 years, companies that come up with a cool idea like Yu-Gi-Oh have made a lot of money by using that idea in many different products, TV shows, and movies for kids.

By spreading the idea around, com-

panies make it seem impossible for kids not to buy something related to the fad.

There's nothing wrong with buying these products. But kid-entertainment experts say kids should be more aware of how companies get them interested in products. Kids also need to know why companies make these products.

"It's about getting you to spend your allowance money on these things," says Kathryn Montgomery, president of the Center for Media Education in Washington, D.C.

The Yu-Gi-Oh brand is a good example of how a good idea becomes a fad.

Yu-Gi-Oh began as a comic book in Japan in 1996. The character Yu-Gi is a kid in high school whose grandfather

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owns a game store. The grandfather gives Yu-Gi an ancient Egyptian puzzle.

When Yu-Gi solves the puzzle he receives magic powers. One of his talents is playing Dueling Monsters – a card game in which two players battle each other using cards based on mystical creatures with different abilities.

The comic book was a huge hit in Japan, partly because it involved trading cards, which many kids were playing.

The company that owns the Yu-Gi-Oh idea in Japan has made more than \$2 billion. Because other products that did well in Japan have become big successes in the US (Power Rangers, “virtual pets,” Nintendo, etc.) the company sold the idea to the same US company that produced Pokémon – 4Kids Entertainment.

Even before the cartoon went on TV in the fall of 2001, 4Kids was slowly introducing it. “We had to tell kids who [Yu-Gi] was, how the game was played, what various power levels the monsters had, and who his circle of friends were,” says Steve Syatt, a 4Kids spokesman.

The company did not want kids to get turned off by a lot of advertising. So first they asked a lot of websites that review new games for kids, like yahooligans.com and figures.com, to write stories about it.

Sending out 1 million free videos

The company then mailed more than 1 million videos with information and scenes from the cartoon to kids across the country. 4Kids got the list of kids’ names and addresses from Toys ‘R Us.

4Kids had done the same thing years ago to stir interest in Pokémon. “It worked so incredibly well the first time,” Mr. Syatt says. “[We wanted to] get the word out directly to kids.”

The cartoon began airing on TV in the fall of 2001. Soon after, Yu-Gi-Oh video games and action figures started showing up in toy stores. But when the trading-card game came out last spring, Yu-Gi-Oh took off. Many kids, like Kyle Dickson, also at the tournament here, learned the game at summer camp.

What attracted Kyle to the game? “The powers are interesting,” says the 10-year-old from Beverly, Mass. “I feel like getting all the cards that exist.”

Many who play the game are like

Kyle. They want to get all the cards so they can play the best game possible. The rarest cards have the best powers.

The companies that sell the cards know this. That’s why they design them so that the kids who are most interested in the game have to spend lots of money.

A nine-card “booster pack” of Yu-Gi-Oh cards costs about \$3. Each booster pack includes one “rare card.” But ultra-rare cards, which are even more powerful, are in only one of every 12 packs.

To get the best cards, you have to buy lots of them. Most of the cards you end up with will be ones you already have.

“They want to keep you hooked,” says Douglas Gentile, director of research at the National Institute on Media and the Family, in Minneapolis. “Their goal is to get you to spend more money, and to get you to get your friends to spend more.”

Are cheaper games just as fun?

Instead of getting interested in a game that requires a lot of money to play better, many toy experts recommend that you look for games that only require one purchase, but can still play out in hundreds of different ways.

“Yu-Gi-Oh requires strategic thinking,” says Stevanne Auerbach, a play and toy expert in San Francisco, “but games like chess and checkers have unlimited strategies and can be more interesting and challenging.”

Still, 4Kids is trying to keep Yu-Gi-Oh from becoming just another fad that fades. The company has decided to allow only a limited number of other companies to use the Yu-Gi-Oh name and characters to sell products.

“We want it to be here for the long haul,” says Syatt, who says 4Kids wants to maintain Yu-Gi-Oh’s “underground” reputation. 4Kids also wants to make sure that older kids and teenagers – between the ages of 9 and 14 – keep buying Yu-Gi-Oh products. The company will not advertise Yu-Gi-Oh to younger kids. When Yu-Gi-Oh appeals to little kids, “that’s the day the big kids will [no longer be interested],” Syatt says.

Regardless of how well he does at Yu-Gi-Oh tournaments, Kyle Amirault says he’ll play for a few more years. “I’ll play as long as it’s fun,” he says.

Noel C. Paul



TOOLS OF THE TRADE: Yu-Gi-Oh trading cards each have different ‘powers.’ The rarest cards are the most prized. ‘Mechanical Chaser,’ for example, sold on eBay for \$250.

TODAY'S ARTICLE ON CHRISTIAN SCIENCE

Bringing a spiritual perspective to daily life

Work that will last

AS PART of our community’s celebration of Black History Month, which took place in the United States last month, I was managing a series of concerts by the Paris-based gospel singer Tori (a.k.a. Victoria Robinson). I loved it, because the music was wonderfully upbeat, happy, and profoundly reverent.

It reminded me of my childhood, when as a boy I would sit outside the Holiness Church around the corner from where I lived and listen to the joyous sounds from the choirs and soloists inside.

Tori’s repertoire includes both recent and traditional pieces, and many were familiar. There was a new one, though, and it made a deep impression on me. Its refrain was, “Only what you do for Christ will last.”

I’m in the news business, and in today’s media-saturated society, yesterday’s news is far worse than yesterday’s bread. It’s nearly useless. It’s used to wrap fish or put under the dog’s water dish. So I am accustomed to working hard and having fun doing it, but my product is often ephemeral. It doesn’t last. As I thought

about the message, I began to wonder: If what I’m doing doesn’t last, is it not being done for Christ?

Then there’s the question of attitude. What if I were producing something lasting – a bridge, maybe, or a poem that would be read for a thousand years – but my attitude was one of burden, irritability, or boredom? That wouldn’t be working for Christ, either.

I’m accustomed to turning not only to the Bible for answers to the problems in my daily life but also to “Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures,” the major work by Mary Baker Eddy, who also started this newspaper. In that book, I found this passage: “The habitual struggle to be always good is unceasing prayer. Its motives are made manifest in the blessings they bring, – blessings which, even if not acknowledged in audible words, attest our worthiness to be partakers of Love” (pg. 4).

Three words stood out to me here: prayer, motives, and blessings. My job isn’t just producing a news story that will be forgotten tomorrow. It’s all about accuracy and integrity. It’s about

efficiency and helping others know about good going on. It’s about punctuality and order. And it’s about having fun doing it – expressing joy. So what I’m really doing isn’t producing that story so much as it is making these good, Godlike qualities part of my life.

A few years ago I had a special assignment. A very senior official was coming to town, and I was named to be the person to make sure that the media got the story.

The official wanted to do a planeside press conference at the tarmac but refused to walk more than 40 feet from the exit ramp to the podium. He specified how far the press should be from the podium. And he didn’t want to wait more than four minutes after landing to have all our setup done. But he couldn’t tell us when his chartered plane would arrive, and the airport couldn’t tell us where they would put the plane. So we didn’t know where or when to do the setup. It was a nightmare, and people all

around me were stressing out.

This time I turned to the Bible and found, “Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee...”

(Luke 4:14).

I had always thought of that verse as just a way for the narrator to get Jesus from one place to another, but then I realized there was another meaning. He returned “in the power of the Spirit.”

Well, I thought, if I identify myself as God’s child, I have to be moving in the power of the Spirit, too. It means I can’t make a mistake, because I have the power of Spirit backing me up. I felt a great joy and enthusiasm for the work. I looked up and saw the official’s plane coming in. Immediately I knew where to have the podium placed and where to put the journalists. We got it done in three minutes, and the official walked 38 steps to his platform.

It really was a jubilant experience, and I had done it by going right back to God as the source of my intelligence. I suppose one could say I was doing it all for Christ, joyously. And the lessons I learned have lasted.

My job is making Godlike qualities part of my life.

Finding certainty in uncertain times



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