

*Trading Card
Games*
FOR
DUMMIES®

by John Kaufeld and Jeremy Smith



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About the Authors

John Kaufeld has been running independent game stores since 1998. He is an officer of the Game Manufacturers Association (GAMA, www.gama.org), a national trade group for manufacturers, designers, distributors, and retailers of everything in the “adventure games” product category. He currently works with GAMA as the Press Liaison for the Origins International Game Expo (www.originsgames.com). John Kaufeld has also written numerous books in the *For Dummies* series.

Jeremy Smith is an associate editor at *InQuest Gamer* magazine, one of the premier publications in the hobby gaming industry. He has written for the magazine since 1996 and has been on its staff since 2001, when he moved from Rhode Island to New York to take on the immense task of playing games for a living. His chief task of compiling and editing the magazine’s price guide harkens back to his card-trading days at the University of Rochester in upstate New York, where he’d spend a weekend turning a handful of junk rares into a new car. Or something close to that, anyway.

The writing part probably sprung out of his lifelong love for words, starting back in Minnesota from age two, reading words off the TV while watching *The Electric Company*. This continued later on when he represented Rhode Island at the National Spelling Bee in 1987 and 1988 and then worked as an editor for the university newspaper in Rochester.

Jeremy’s previous interests in playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and collecting sports cards (go Red Sox and Patriots!) during the ’80s and early ’90s led to his entry into the trading card game arena, starting when he bought his first packs of *Magic: The Gathering* back in 1994 and told the dealer, “Hi! I’d like to pick up a new addiction!” How prophetic, indeed.

In addition to his daily routine of charting card prices, building decks, and occasionally getting some real work done at *InQuest Gamer*, Jeremy also moonlights as a certified judge for Wizards of the Coast’s sanctioned *Magic* tournament program. This has given him experience in everything from running a tournament of more than 100 players by himself to training and mentoring new judges to making darned sure that the players all have a good time and come back for more. It has also taken him to exciting places like Amsterdam, New Orleans, and Kansas City to judge at major tournaments. Well, at least Kansas City had some great steaks.

Dedication

John Kaufeld: To Jenny, because I loved you the first moment we met, and every day is like meeting again.

To Critter, Pooz, and The Mighty S-PAL (Sir Poops-a-Lot), for the smiles, the hugs, and the loving way you say “Daddy, is the book done *yet?*”

To my friends and compatriots at John Wiley and Sons, for the opportunity of a lifetime.

Thank you, one and all.

Jeremy Smith: To my parents, Marilyn and Michael Smith, and my grandparents, Helen and Julius Langman and Edith and Jack Smith, for all of their love and support, especially while seeing me turn a hobby that often took up way too much time into a great gig at *InQuest Gamer* and now into this fine *For Dummies* venture. Also, to my brothers, Adam and Joel, for always being there to sit down and play games with, and for putting up with me for, well, ever. Oh yeah, and that love and support thing too. And finally, to my great little nephew, Matthew, because he’s amazing!

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Thank you also go out to Andy Hollandbeck and Anthony Gallela, Copy Editor and Technical Editor, respectively. Without them, this book would look like . . . well . . . never mind what it would’ve looked like. Some things are better left unknown.

Jeremy Smith: Countless people have contributed to my experiences in the gaming world over the years, and a few merit special acknowledgement. First, to Richard Garfield and Peter Adkison, for bringing such an amazing game genre to life and turning it into a worldwide phenomenon. Without you guys, this book simply wouldn’t exist. And neither would the old-school trading card game for which I’ll always have a soft spot, *Netrunner*.

Many thanks are also in order to *InQuest Gamer* magazine and Wizard Entertainment for giving me the opportunity to actually make a living and feed my gaming obsession all at the same time. Special props to Mike Searle, Brent Fishbaugh, Thorin McGee, and Matt Cabral for working with me every day and for, ahem, *discussing* everything from the best *Magic* card of all time to the most fetching leading lady in gaming.

On the organized play side, thanks to all the judges and staff in the Wizards of the Coast DCI judge program, especially Andy Heckt, John Carter, and Sheldon Menery, for their tireless work in helping me and tons of other judges progress as ambassadors for *Magic* and the gaming world.

Finally, a big thank you to everyone at Wiley Publishing, especially Melody Layne, for giving me the opportunity to work on this book and for seeing me through the whole process, and Paul Levesque and Andy Hollandbeck, for their editing help and insights.

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Introduction

When *Magic: The Gathering* first arrived on the market, nobody really knew what to think. Up to that point, the roles of *collector* and *player* seemed pretty well defined. Sports enthusiasts collected sports cards, game lovers played card games (and lots of other games, too), and mildly eccentric people like me collected games. People, businesses, and governments enjoyed simple peace and prosperity. All seemed well and good with the world.

Magic changed all that. (To be fair, natural disasters and climate change accounted for some things, but the *Magic* explosion covered most everything else.)

Overnight, thundering herds of *Magic* fans raced to their local game stores, plunked down cash and credit cards, and bought every pack of cards they could find. Nobody could get enough of the product — distributors and stores sold out as soon as shipments arrived. That scarcity both created and drove a huge secondary market for single cards from the game. People who never sold a thing in their lives suddenly created healthy small businesses by purchasing whole boxes of *Magic* packs, opening them, and reselling the cards inside. One friend of mine made as much from selling *Magic* cards during the game's first year as he did in his full-time computer geek job.

What made this crazy game so special that it rocked an entire industry? Two words cover most of the answer: collectability and customization.

Magic delivered a whole new type of game experience. By making the cards *collectible*, players didn't automatically own everything they needed. Powerful cards rose in value, both in game play and in money. The *customization* aspects put players completely in charge of their gaming worlds. Winning the game meant a combination of collecting the right cards, assembling them into a unique playing deck, sending that deck into battle, and then duking it out for victory. Losing turned into a post-race tuning session where you analyzed what worked and what didn't and endlessly fiddled with your deck to prepare it for next game.

Today, the trading card game market includes hundreds of games for all age ranges and interests. Along the way, *Magic* inspired new types of games, like collectible miniatures games, collectible chip games, and constructible miniatures games. It spawned tournaments and other competitions, and even full-fledged professional tours.

With so many products on the market and so many things happening in the collectible game world, new players (and the people they know) often feel overwhelmed at first. That's where *Trading Card Games For Dummies* enters the picture.

Think of *Trading Card Games For Dummies* as a cross between a tour guide, a how-to book, and a treatise on the joys of playing games with your friends. In one way or another, the book touches on all of these things and more, giving you everything you need to know to start enjoying (or at least making sense of) the wild world of collectible games.

About This Book

In its five parts, this book introduces the world of trading card games and collectible miniatures games, tours the most popular games on the market, and explains the basic strategies for collectible games in general. It also gets into the tournament, trading, and eBay sides of the trading card game industry (each of which could almost support a book by themselves).

Trading Card Games For Dummies walks with you through this fun and crazy landscape, helping you find your way, pointing out the pitfalls, and generally injecting fun into the journey. After all, if games aren't fun, then what's the point of playing?



Because players see trading card games and collectible miniatures games as two faces of the same card (so to speak), both types of games get attention in these pages. This book also covers new types of collectible games that don't easily fit into a current category.

Conventions Used in This Book

To make things easier to find and understand, *Trading Card Games For Dummies* displays some of its information with special formatting that makes it stand out from the regular text and automatically draws your eye in its direction.

Here's what to look for:

- ✓ The names of various games and the titles of expansion sets look like this: *Navia Dratp*, *Wars*, and *Pokémon*
- ✓ Individual card and figure names appear like this: **Harried Editor**, **Venture**, and **Podo**
- ✓ Internet addresses look like this: `www.originsgames.com`



The book also relies on *italic type* when emphasizing particular words in normal text, *just like this*. (Sadly, the production department took away my random typeface font, so you won't see anything in "ransom note" style — at least not soon.)

What You're Not to Read

Nobody needs to know *everything* in this book, but almost everybody can benefit from some of it. Rather than spend the next few days of your life in unending devotion to every page in here, try skipping through the chapters a bit to find *exactly* the information that you need.

If you just want an overview of various games, skip the sections on each game's strategic details. Nothing sends people into unconsciousness faster than a deep, meaningful discussion of land selection in *Magic: The Gathering* or a comparison and contrast of the Invulnerability and Impervious super powers in *HeroClix*. Just leave those sections alone and focus on high-level descriptions and set names.

If your world begins and ends with deck boxes and card decks, then avoid the chapters about collectible miniatures games. If plastic only raises your blood pressure, it's simply the healthy thing to do.

Beyond that, feel free to read, skip, ignore, highlight, and generally ingest everything in this book. That's why it's here — for you!

Foolish Assumptions

Everybody makes them, but nobody thinks that *his* assumptions might lean toward the foolish side — well, nobody but me. I spent a lot of time thinking about you, dear reader, while preparing this book. I needed a good picture of you (actually, the several "yous" in my imagination) so I could pick and choose what information to include in the book. Here's what I came up with:

- ✔ You recently started playing some sort of collectible game yourself and find yourself wanting to know more about this peculiar form of entertainment.
- ✔ You dearly love one particular collectible game, but you feel like branching out a bit into something new and different yet still in the collectible game world.
- ✔ Your friend, relative, or child recently dove into the world of trading card games, and you want to know what sort of whirlpool she's swimming in.

- ✓ Your first forays into learning about trading card games left you feeling confused, befuddled, and a bit out of place, like a vegetarian taking a seat at a hog roast.
- ✓ Everybody you talk to tries to convince you that *their* game is the *only* one to play, regardless of your actual interests, and you just want some unbiased information so you can make up your own mind.

If any of those descriptions sound like you, then *Trading Card Games For Dummies* stands ready to answer your questions, calm your fears, and generally ease your angst. Even if you *don't* find yourself in that list, there's still plenty to love in this book. (And if all else fails, it makes a great gift.)

How This Book Is Organized

If you ever traveled somewhere new, you know the value of a roadmap. (Or, if you're a guy, you know the value of blindly plugging along in faith that your destination should turn up at any moment.) For those of you who enjoy roadmaps (guys included), this book organizes information into a series of parts. Each part focuses on a section of the trading card and collectible game market, whether it looks at details of particular games or takes a broader approach to scanning the horizons of an entire segment.

The following sections map out this book's parts, giving you a preview of what to expect in each one. Use them to find a good starting point in the book or take them as signs that the content you want really exists in here somewhere.

Part I: Playing a Game Like Nothing You've Played Before

This part introduces the world of trading card and collectible games. And what a world it is! Whether you like science fiction, fantasy, anime, superheroes, or horror, a trading card game centered on your favorite topic awaits you somewhere out there!

The chapters in this part cover the basics of collectible games. They introduce the concepts behind gameplay and collecting. Plus, they dig into the idea of customizing your playing deck or army — one of the biggest things that sets trading card and collectible games apart from all of the other games on the planet. The part closes with a chapter that guides you to the best game for your personality, your playing style, and your interests.

Part II: Introducing the Big Six

Every game developer thinks his game can change the world. They imagine millions upon millions of people simultaneously whipping out their wallets and buying every booster ever made and then playing in huge tournaments that span the world. Of course, reality looks a lot different than that. Of the hundreds of collectible games that hit the market, very few survive the impact.

This part looks at the six big guns in the industry — the games that didn't just survive in their niche, but achieved amazing success in sales, popularity, and tournament play. If you want to try your hand at a national tournament or perhaps play for cash and prizes on a pro tour, then build your skills in these games. They represent the “best of class” games in the trading card game market. If you play these games, you can always find some competition.

Each chapter in this part focuses on a single game, serving as a primer on the game's background, story, playing style, card sets, and basic feel. The chapters walk you through a lot of information in a short time, giving you both the broad overview and some hands-on depth for games like *Magic*, *Pokémon*, *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, and others. That combination helps you taste the flavor of the game so you can decide if it tempts your interest enough to tease the cash from your wallet.

Part III: Shuffling through the Rest of the Decks

Where do the standout games like the ones in Part II come from? They don't just spring fully formed into a world event, like some kind of two-dimensional Athena leaping straight from a designer's head into national awareness and tournament play. No, they start like all trading card games do, jostling for position and players among the hundreds of new games released each year.

Part III turns its attention to the mass of second-tier titles — new trading card games that just appeared on the market, as well as older games with dedicated but smaller audiences. Despite their “supporting player” status, these games promise lots of great playing time. They also make very good places to learn more about the whole trading card game world, thanks to their low prices.

This part starts with several chapters devoted to games in various genres. Chapters cover games that draw their roots from comics, anime, manga, TV shows, movies, and even literature. Because games target audiences of different ages as well as interests, the final chapter in the part classifies games by age range.

Part IV: Diving Deeper into the Hobby

Most everybody begins a trading card game hobby the same way: Picking a game, learning to play, and enjoying rounds with your friends. At some point, you start to itch for something more. Maybe you want to face new opponents to continue honing your skills. Perhaps you need to track down some elusive card that completes a new deck design. Or possibly, a friend told you about an action-filled summer game convention, so now you want to attend one yourself.

Whatever the motivation, you find yourself seeking more from your games. When that feeling hits, flip to Part V, the repository of knowledge for growing you into a more well-rounded gamer.

The chapters in this part look at several completely different facets of the game hobby. The part opens with a deeper look at the basics of collecting and trading, while another chapter offers a lot of very valuable information about navigating the world of eBay as both a buyer and seller of tradeable gaming goodies. Other chapters educate you about the tournament scenes and terminology, covering everything from the Swiss-style tournaments at your local game store to the highest levels of both Swiss and elimination events, as well as the joys, commitments, and rewards of volunteering to promote your favorite game.

Part V: The Part of Tens

Like all of its siblings in the *For Dummies* series, *Trading Card Games For Dummies* closes with the classic Part of Tens. These chapters keep things short, simple, light, and informative — just the way you like it.

Part V includes a quick recap of the best buying, selling, and trading ideas in the book, plus a bunch of ideas for fast-playing games to keep yourself and your fellow players amused during those long waits between rounds at tournaments. The book closes with the kind of information that *every* player wishes her parents and friends had — namely, a list of great gift ideas for the game player.

Icons Used in This Book

Almost every game covered in this book uses its own shorthand to communicate information like a card's power, defense, function, and even collectability. Whether a game uses colors, pictures, special graphics, or cool holographic text, the result is the same: the communication of a lot of facts to you, the player, in a very short amount of time.

Trading Card Games For Dummies knows a good thing when it sees it, so this book employs the same communications concept through the use of its own special icons. You find the icons scattered in the white space throughout the chapters. Each icon marks something especially interesting, valuable, or even worrisome. Icons act like little signposts along the game information highway (except these never have bullet holes in them).

Here's a preview of the icons, along with a quick explanation of what each one means:



The Tip icon appears more often in the book than any of the others. It delivers shortcuts, points out important stuff, provides ideas, and generally makes your game-playing experience a lot more fun.



When you see the Remember icon, slow down your reading for a moment and take a second look at the text. Remember icons draw your attention to stuff that makes a *big* difference in your games. Whether the text clarifies some peculiar rule (and goodness knows these games include some doozies) or highlights a particular game's unusual twist, it's definitely worth your time.



This perennially friendly icon points out the particularly geeky stuff included in the book for the folks who love that sort of detail. Feel free to either dive in or skip over the text next to a Technical Stuff icon, depending on how much detail you really want on a topic. Text behind a Tech Stuff icon usually requires a strong understanding of the game, because it peers into the truly arcane inner workings of your favorite games.



The name says it all. Warning icons communicate basic but important ideas that protect you from some sort of horrid problem in your game (like building an illegal deck or losing before you even get to play a card). Pay attention to this information and read it carefully because the victory you save could be your own!

Every book in the *For Dummies* line uses the same icons, so look for some old friends as you wander through other titles with the familiar black and yellow cover. It's just one of the things that makes our books more fun, more useful, and more valuable to you, the reader! (Note to the Marketing Department: You owe me.)

Where to Go from Here

Ready to dive into the realms of trading card games and collectible miniatures games? With an entire book of information and guidance in hand, the prospect might look a bit overwhelming right now. But don't worry: *Trading Card Games For Dummies* goes with you one step at a time, at the pace you set.

Where you go from here depends on what you already know and what you want to know better. Here are a few possible starting points to whet your game-playing appetite:

- ✔ If you face a gift-giving crisis and you picked up this book in a last-minute hope of finding some quick answers, go straight to Chapters 22 in the Part of Tens (Part V). And remember: In an emergency, you can always give someone a copy of this book.
- ✔ If you don't play any trading card games right now but you want to change that, then begin at the beginning. Start with a trip through the chapters in Part I. They build a good foundation of terms, concepts, and occasional humor that gets you ready to join the fun in whichever game piques your interest. With the basics under your belt, head to Part III to explore the games by genre and age range.
- ✔ If someone in your immediate circle of family or friends plays a trading card game, and you just want to understand him and what he does a little better, you should open with the quick overview of trading card games in Chapter 1 and then proceed to the more detailed information about your friend's or relative's game of choice.
- ✔ To find out more about one of the many trading card games or collectible miniatures games out there, head straight to the appropriate chapters of Parts II, III, and IV.



If you don't really know where to start, just open the book, pick a spot, and start reading. From there, follow your impulses and intuition. No matter where you want to go in the trading card game world, you can get there (or at least most of the way) somewhere in these pages. Enjoy the trip! And look for me each summer at the big Origins International Game Expo in Columbus, Ohio. (I'm the one with more cards than hair!)

Part I

Playing a Game Like Nothing You've Played Before

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"I'm always adding cards to my deck. Right now I'm looking for one monster card, one ritual card and two gold Mastercards."

In this part . . .

The first time you visit a new place, half the fun is figuring out where everything is, how to get there, and when the restaurants close. (They invariably close just before you can get there from the hotel.) The other half of the fun involves the joy of exploration, of discovery, of seeking out new life and new civilizations . . . sorry, I got a little carried away.

Anyway, people enjoy seeing new places and trying new things because of the sense of freshness and uncertainty. You don't know what you'll see next or what you'll find around the corner, and that's just plain fun!

This part takes you on that type of journey. You explore the strange (sometimes *really* strange) world of trading card games and collectible miniatures games. This part maps out the big concepts that make the games work, explains some of the language surrounding the games, and generally outfits you for the journey ahead.

If you never tried a collectible game before, definitely start here. This part gets you going in an easy, comfortable way!

Chapter 1

Mixing Chess, Baseball Cards, and Green Army Men

In This Chapter

- ▶ Wrapping your mind around a really different game
 - ▶ Getting familiar with the basics
 - ▶ Peering through the industry's history
 - ▶ Trying your hand (and your deck) in tournament play
-

Remember creating amazing stories with the toys you had at hand when you were young — like when the little people from your playset worked with the toy tanks to rescue the block family from a Fate Worse Than Death at the hands (well, claws) of the giant rampaging dinosaur? Or when you made up a game about driving across the country because you had a bunch of toy cars, some dice, and a huge United States wall map? (Granted, I couldn't exactly explain how it worked, but my dad played it with me anyway.)

Regardless of the details, you took a bunch of parts that didn't naturally match and turned them into a fun and functional activity. A few rules (that frequently changed during play) and a lot of imagination held the whole thing together.

Collectible games take a strangely similar approach to those childhood games you imagined into life. They borrow concepts and bits of gameplay from classic games played with a traditional deck of cards, from exotic board games, from historical miniatures games, and more. Collectible games mix those parts into an entirely new kind of game — games that feature compelling play as well as reveal the amazing creativity of their designers.

This chapter takes you on a whirlwind tour of the collectible game world, outfitting you with a basic framework to decorate with your newfound knowledge. It gives some history, explains a bit of the overall background, and touches on the world of competitive play. In short, it's your pocket guide to the world(s) of collectible games. Enjoy!

Imagine Playing Chess with a Rook, Two Queens, Some Baseball Cards, and a Toy Tank

The first time a friend of mine explained the concept of a collectible card game to me (in a very animated and excited way, I might add), I thought he was nuts. Visions of my failed flirtation with baseball cards passed before my eyes. “You mean that you keep buying pack after pack of cards, and you might never get them all?” His look told me that I clearly missed the point.

After he calmed down enough to finally *play* the game with me, I got the point — and I got hooked.

There’s something strangely fun about playing collectible games. First, the whole “collectability” aspect makes buying that next pack of cards all the more thrilling. Beyond that, the challenge of analyzing the cards, learning their abilities, and assembling them into winning combinations gives you a mental charge unlike any other kind of game out there. It’s a blast!

The vast majority of collectible games share a few basic elements that identify them as part of the genre. The way each game interprets and presents its rules and methods of play varies like a politician on the campaign trail, but the heart remains the same (the heart of the game, that is, not the politician — but enough about that).

In no particular order, here’s what makes collectible games unique, set apart from the mainstream, noncollectible games of the world:

- ✓ Players collect game cards by either purchasing starters or booster packs. Starters include a basic deck of cards, along with the rules and anything else you need to start playing. From there, players get more cards by purchasing booster packs (much like baseball card packs, but without the gum) and by trading cards with other enthusiasts.
- ✓ Before sitting down to play a game, you need to build a *deck* from your card collection. Unlike a traditional card game that uses exactly the same card every time you play (such as *Uno* or a standard deck of playing cards), you pick the cards that go into your playing deck, and your opponent does the same thing with her deck.
- ✓ The players in a collectible game get to both *follow and build a story* with their game. The mixture of cards in a player’s deck usually follows a piece of the overarching fiction behind the game — a snippet of the

Fullmetal Alchemist storyline is revealed in Figure 1-1 — but a deck presents new twists and turns on its own. It lets the player enjoy the game's back story while carving his own niche inside it.

- ✔ Rather than play with identical situations and combinations from the game's movie, TV show, anime series, or whatever, collectible games encourage players to *create their own decks or teams* and to interpret the story in their own ways. This builds the personal buy-in from the players because now *they're* part of the story: "Do you remember the episode when Major Ronaldi unexpectedly helped Don Alejandro escape during the fake peasant uprising? That's what inspired this deck. I call it *Enemies, Friends, and a Cast of Peasants*."
- ✔ To build a successful deck, the player needs to consider both *attack* and *defense options*. How the deck responds to threats and opportunities means a lot more over time than simply packing the deck with high-value cards and attempting to browbeat your opponent into submission.
- ✔ The other key to creating the best collectible game decks involves balancing the way your cards *interact with each other*. Like thin lines spun together into a near-unbreakable cord, individual cards can't do much on their own, but their collective power grows immensely when boosted by others. Finding those interactions (like the ones shown in Figure 1-1), understanding how they work, and building your decks around them make the difference between average decks and tournament winners.
- ✔ Building bigger and better decks requires *a bigger and better collection* of game items. The bigger your collection, the more flexibility you bring to deck building. This truism doesn't apply equally to all games, though. Through clever design or alternate rules, some games and tournaments level the playing field (at least with regard to card collections), specifically to encourage new players and to help them build experience. After all, getting beaten every time you play eventually takes all the fun out of the game.

Whether you pick a game based on back-story, gameplay, a favorite movie, or just because somebody taught you how to play and you feel like staying with it, the elements that I describe in the previous list appear (in one way or another) in the game. When mixed correctly, these elements give the game fascination and staying power. If they get out of alignment because the designer focused on one thing at the expense of the others, then a potentially great game dies. But such is life, eh?



Because so many games (both good and bad) don't succeed, all those extra booster packs and starter decks find ready, waiting homes run by eager convention vendors. You can almost always find the cards you want at a price you're willing to pay (and which has no relationship to the normal retail



Figure 1-1:
Winry
Rockbell is
one piece of
the mosaic
that is
Fullmetal
Alchemist.

Whether you pick a game based on back story, gameplay, or a favorite movie, price, either) in the exhibit halls of the major summer conventions.

Meeting the Many Games That Await You

First, a confession: The title of this book misled you just a little bit. (You can blame the marketing people for this one — and the peculiar relationship between how publishers name books and how those names translate into bookstore shelving patterns.) Although the book's title *clearly* focuses on trading card games, the book actually covers a lot more of the collectible games hobby than just cards.

Since its beginnings in 1993, the collectible games market absolutely exploded, both in size and type of game. Even though trading card games launched the industry's ship, a whole variety of collectible games keep the vessel going at full steam today.

Here's a quick introduction to the broad categories of collectible games on the market today:

- ✔ **TCG (trading card game):** It all started with trading card games. These games mix the playability of a pack of playing cards with the collectability of sports cards. You typically join the game by purchasing a starter set and then expanding your collection with booster packs. These games also go by the abbreviation *CCG*, short for *collectible card game*.
- ✔ **CMG (collectible miniatures game):** For years, nobody could mistake a trading card game for your standard miniatures game — the whole flat versus three-dimensional thing gave away the difference immediately. On top of that, when you bought pieces for a miniatures game, you knew exactly what you were getting in the box. All of that changed when the folks at WizKids Games came up with the idea of a collectible game using preprinted miniatures instead of cards. The figures came randomly packed in starters and boosters, just like trading card games, but now you got a whole new kind of playing experience out of the box. To keep up with their compatriots at the trading card game companies, some CMG firms call their games TMGs (for *tradeable miniatures games*).
- ✔ **CSG (constructible strategy game):** After their success with collectible miniatures games, the folks at WizKids started looking for other cool new collectible game concepts. In a leap of logic that defies rational explanation, they came up with the idea of pirate ships that you assemble from plastic parts like a very simple model kit (see Figure 1-2). In true do-it-yourself form, they coined the term *constructible strategy game* to properly identify their new do-it-yourself product.

Figure 1-2:
Assemble
(literally)
your fleet
and sail it to
victory with
construc-
tible
strategy
games like
*Pirates of
the Spanish
Main.*



✓ **CTG (collectible throwing game):** Nothing inspires a person quite like someone else's success. Given the roaring sales of all things collectible, a group of former Wizards of the Coast employees threw their hats (and their game) into the ring with the creation of the first collectible throwing game. Will it create a new genre of collectible game like collectible miniatures did for WizKids? Only time will tell.

As you probably noticed by now, game companies apply the words *trading*, *tradeable*, and *collectible* almost interchangeably — and so do many people who play the games. That means you might hear one person describe a given game as a *CCG* while someone else calls the exact same game a *TCG*, and then they start arguing about who's right. That's what happens in an industry filled with intensely creative people: Getting them to go in one direction (or in this case, agree on just one term) is like herding cats.



If you get caught near one of those *it isn't a TCG, it's a CCG* arguments, just smile, nod, and stay quiet. It will end eventually. (Don't try feigning death, though, because that doesn't even slow down the people who argue over such things. They merely assume that you closed your eyes and laid down so you could focus on their thoughts, so they keep talking.)

Game designers continue innovating in hopes of finding The Next Big Thing, so don't feel too surprised if yet another new type of collectible game hits the market by the time you read this. (But to be honest, after collectible cards, miniatures, mini-kits, dice, and poker chips, I can't imagine what might join the frenzy next. Maybe a collectible pen game?)



To get some guidance on picking the right type of game for you, go over to Chapter 3. For more about collectible miniatures games (CMGs) and constructible strategy games (CSGs) in general, flip ahead to Part IV. Discussions about trading card games and that odd collectible throwing game mostly live in Parts II and III.

Shuffling through the Genre's History and Highlights

The world of collectible games didn't spring fully grown from someone's head, although you can easily argue that the whole thing *did* involve magic of one kind or another. (Granted, that explanation makes a horrible pun, but such are the risks you take in this job. Good luck, soldier!)

Back in 1993, the folks at Wizards of the Coast, a small game company in Washington State, connected with game designer and graduate student

Richard Garfield through a mutual friend. Wizards wanted to publish a game, and Garfield invented an amazingly cool thing called *Roborally* (which, incidentally, you can still purchase today). Unfortunately, *Roborally* required a lot of special counters and die-cut boards, which Wizards didn't have enough money to pay for right then.

The company challenged Garfield to create something simple that it *could* afford to publish in the short term and that would ultimately bankroll *Roborally* — some kind of card game, perhaps (cards didn't cost much to make). Around this time, Garfield finished his PhD in combinatorial mathematics. Humorously, he took a position as a math professor in Washington State because, although he loved designing games, he didn't think it would provide a steady income. (You can already see where this is going.)

Garfield came through with a little card game about wizards casting spells at each other. To make a long story short, that game turned into *Magic: The Gathering*.

Nobody really knew what to make of the game when it arrived on the scene. Was it a fantasy trading card series? The cards featured gorgeous artwork, but they also sported numbers and text for a game of some kind. But how do you play a game when you don't have all of the cards?

By the next year, people figured out the concept, and *Magic* exploded. The company's initial order for 600,000 cards quickly gave way to a second order for 1.8 million cards, plus a third for 7.6 million more. *Magic* truly made industry magic.

All of that success didn't go unnoticed in the game community. Over the next few years, dozens of companies released hundreds of trading card games. If a concept stood still long enough, somebody made a collectible game out of it. Unfortunately, many of the trees that gave their lives for all of that cardstock died in vain; most of these games died shortly after release. (Don't feel sad, though, because many of the games deserved to die. They, um, lacked quality.)

In 1999, lightning struck the collectible game market again in the form of an electric yellow rat with a weirdly shaped tail. *Pokémon*, a phenomenon in Japan, hit the shores of the United States like a hurricane of mini-monsters. If kids breathed, they wanted — no, *needed* — *Pokémon* cards. Wizards of the Coast, which published the game in the United States, had another hit on its hands.

After *Pokémon* quieted down a bit, the industry got a touch of déjà vu when it turned its eyes to yet another upstart company from Washington State. This little company, called WizKids Games, came up with an interesting twist on

the collectible trading card game concept: Do away with the cards and play with little plastic guys instead.

This company's new game, *Mage Knight*, took players into a world filled with sword and sorcery, along with a hefty dose of steam and magic-driven technology. *Mage Knight* gave collectible game players a whole new kind of game to try. And try it they did! *Mage Knight* booster packs sold like wildfire, establishing collectible miniatures as a new genre in the collectible game market.

WizKids took its concept one step further when it introduced *Pirates of the Spanish Main*, the first *constructible* miniatures game. The game pieces came flat, like credit cards with die-cut outlines sliced through them. Players punch out the pieces, assemble their sailing ships, and play a game on any handy flat surface. (Sorry, despite the nautical theme, the pieces still don't work in water.)

Given what happened in the industry since 1993, who knows where it might go next — or what you could start collecting any day now?

Challenging Your Skills in Casual Play, Tournaments, and Tours

Most people begin playing collectible games at home among friends. Casual play like this forms the backbone of every collectible game on the market.



A few words about rarity and collectability

To enhance *collectability* (which, in market-speak, means “talking you into purchasing that entire booster display box”), game companies use a system of increasingly rare and hard-to-find cards. They make the most valuable and powerful cards *really* hard to find, while letting you swim in the mundane versions.

Every collectible game booster pack includes a mixture of common, uncommon, and rare items. Although you know how many cards or figures the booster contains at each rarity level, you don't know the precise items in the package (or at least you *shouldn't* know) before opening it.

The item's *rarity* level affects how much the item is worth, both in gameplay and in cold, hard cash. Sometimes a particularly useful but more mundane card might command a little bit of money, but most of the time, everybody wants — and pays for — the rarest items.

In the last few years, many games took rarity to a whole new level with super-rare and limited-edition figures and cards. Players both love and loathe these changes, depending on whom you ask. But one thing's certain: They keep buying those boosters.

Playing for fun gives you a chance to build your skills, try new cards, and just enjoy yourself.

After playing against your friends for a while, you usually get an itch to inflict — sorry, *try* — your deck designs and game-playing skills on someone else. When that feeling hits you, fire up your Web browser and point it to the tournament locator at your game company's Web site.

Almost every collectible game company out there supports some kind of organized tournament system. After you sign up as a player (each company's Web site explains how that works), you can participate in all kinds of tournaments and special game events.

The world of tournament play begins with games at your friendly local store. These games give you a chance to meet more players, trade for better cards, and generally test your skills in a new environment. After each tournament, the judge (a volunteer with the game company) records the results online and notes that you participated. This makes you eligible for tournament prizes, plus the occasional shipment of free goodies straight from the manufacturer.

But local tournaments barely scratch the surface of organized play. After you get out of the local store, you find yourself taking part in regional and national tournaments, each of which might draw hundreds of competitors. This level of play usually happens at local and regional game conventions. A few national events also happen during Origins, GenCon, and Wizard World — the big summer game conventions. Most of the big events are “opens,” meaning they don't require any kind of lower-level qualifying victory to get in and play. However, if you win a qualifier that leads up to one of these tournaments, you get to skip the first day or two of the Big Event and dive straight into the heart of the competition.

Of course, the pinnacle of the pyramid for game players involves the Pro Tour, in which people play their games for the thrill of victory, plus delightful sums of money. Due to their rarified competitive environment, the Pro Tours demand that you wade through a rigorous schedule of qualifying events.

When you join that elite “pro” club, though, all sorts of opportunities open to you. I watched a 20-something Pro Tour player sign cards and give gameplay hints to journalists during a major trade show a few years ago. The game company flew him to the trade show, paid for his stay, and treated him like royalty. Now there's something worth aspiring to!



To find out more about conventions and the Pro Tour, flip ahead to Chapter 19.

Chapter 2

Looking under the Hood: What Makes Collectible Games Tick?

In This Chapter

- ▶ Figuring out what the cards do
 - ▶ Understanding how card companies sell their cards
 - ▶ Creating your card collection
 - ▶ Finding combinations and taking stock
 - ▶ Meeting the archetypes
 - ▶ Uncovering the ways to win
-

If you only know games that use a traditional deck of cards or classic card games like *Mille Bornes*, *Rook*, or *Uno*, a collectible game introduces a lot of foreign concepts, starting with the idea that each player brings his own deck filled with just the cards that he wants to play. To a *Spades* or *Hearts* player, that sounds suspiciously like a stacked deck!

As you shuffle through a stack of cards or watch a game in progress for the first time, many of the basics look very confusing. What do the cards symbolize? Why do some cards stay on the table while others seem to bounce in and out of play almost immediately? And why do the cards wear little plastic coats?

Is this a case of “So many questions, so little time?” Not necessarily. If you’ve never played a trading card game before and are feeling a bit lost right now, all you really need to do is invest a few minutes with the information in this chapter. It gives you some perspective of the different types of cards, introduces you to the way that collectible games begin and grow through new sets, and offers some basic tips for protecting your cards from wear and tear.

(In case you wondered, that's where the little plastic raincoats come into play.) The chapter also includes some thoughts about personal playing styles, tips for identifying great card combinations, and some guidance about determining how much each card contributes to your playing deck versus how much space it takes. Enjoy yourself!

Recognizing the Basic Types of Cards

Although the artwork changes and the numbers move all over the place, some basic concepts stay true across all (or at least *almost* all) trading card games — and that includes the type of cards in the set. Regardless of the theme, back story, complexity, or target age range, all games are populated with characters that do stuff, have places where the action happens, use tons of props, and spin out a variety of plot complications.

Those needs translate into a basic group of card types. Understanding these basic types helps you pick up new games very quickly. If you've got the general idea of how these types of cards work together, you only need to figure out how the details in your new game govern the cards. Game mechanics, the core rules of the game that define its look and feel (stuff like how cards come into play, timing, and resources), vary wildly depending on the game, but the basics — ah, the basics — usually remain the same.



Of course, as soon as I write something like *the basics always stay the same*, somebody out there comes out with a game that breaks all of the industry norms. But that's a good thing; games like that keep other designers on their toes and ensure that the trading card game world stays new and vibrant. If you think that sounds like “positive media spin,” you're probably right. Designers sometimes go overboard in their quest for new and different mechanics. Instead of elegant innovation, they end up with a horrid, confusing, and unplayable kluge of unrelated elements — and all in the name of *new*. But I digress. . . .

The following bullets outline the common card types you find in trading card games. Although the names change for every game, the concepts still hold true:

- ✓ Most of the action in a game begins and ends with the **characters**. (See Figure 2-1.) These cards represent the people, aliens, ships, cars, armies, or mobs that rampage through your game's world. Most of the cards in your decks come from this group because, when you get right down to it, every story depends on strong characters.
- ✓ Any time you get people involved in something, they need **equipment** of one kind or another to make their tasks easier. These cards usually add new abilities to your characters or strengthen their existing skills. These

cards include high-tech spy gadgets, planes, cars, and weapons of all shapes, sizes, and eras.

- ✔ **Locations** set the stage for your characters, giving them places to control, fight over, and generally hang out. Depending on the game, locations might or might not take center stage in the gameplay. Some games treat locations like resource generators, while others cast them in a very central role by making them part of the victory conditions. Locations usually come into play and stay there — at least until another group of cards blows them away.
- ✔ Not every well-laid plan goes, well, according to plan. That's where **interrupt** cards come into play. These plot complications can alter the course of a battle, deliver extra resources, shuffle characters around, and generally wreak havoc with your opponent's strategies. This type of card usually comes into play at any point in the game, does its thing, and then vanishes into the discard pile.
- ✔ **Effects** alter the game in larger ways and last over many turns. They come into the game during your turn just like characters and equipment, but they function more like interrupts. They stay on the table indefinitely, often forming a support base for your deck's key strategies.



Figure 2-1:
The Sinner's
Body card
shows
Edward
Elric, a
character
from
Fullmetal
Alchemist.



Some games start with the basic card types and then add rules that change how the cards work in the game. In the *Vs.* game from Upper Deck, for instance, you can play *any* card in the deck face-down into your resource row. Of course, if you put the *right* type of card in there — namely a Plot Twist (the *Vs.* game version of the “interrupt” card) or a Location — you can gain an extra benefit during the game.

Making Sense of Base Sets and Expansions

During a business trip several years ago, I snuck away to a local game store for a round of my favorite card game, the now-defunct *Star Wars Customizable Card Game* from Decipher. Although I brought one of my best Light Side rebel decks, my Dark Side opponent absolutely crushed me, thanks specifically to some cards from a newly released starter set.

New card releases add much of the spice and competitiveness to trading card games. They give you a reason to continue collecting cards, plus they keep you looking for new combinations. The “killer combo” from the last set might not work anymore, but suddenly one of the cards from a couple of sets ago — the one that you couldn’t imagine *ever* using in a deck — suddenly takes on new value. Each expansion usually increases the game’s complexity with new gameplay mechanics, and it rewards long-time players who invest time and energy investigating the depths of each card’s text.



Every collectible game starts with a *base set*. The game’s first release includes both starter decks and booster packs. Some games (notably *Magic: The Gathering* and a few other well-established ones) take that a step further by adding a basic starter set, several advanced decks called *preconstructed decks* (or *precons* for short), and a variety of other specialized products for tournament play. Preconstructed decks are decks that have been built by experts to guarantee an interesting game. They’re a great way to start enjoying the game fast without having to spend a lot of energy on building a really good deck before you know whether you’re going to want to really invest in the game. As your game play becomes more sophisticated, you’ll probably want to modify even preconstructed decks to make them even more powerful. New games, on the other hand, tend to stay with just starters and boosters.

The game company typically gives players about four months to play with the current set before it releases the first expansion. Most often, these new releases contain only booster packs rather than both starters and boosters. Sure, some games break this rule, but the vast majority adhere to it. Why would they do it that way? Mainly because it costs a *lot* less money to print booster packs alone than to print both boosters *and* starters. (At least that’s the most plausible explanation.)



The exotic world of limited-edition cards

Unlike the normal cards in any particular set, *limited-edition cards* make their appearance in a variety of ways. Booster sets might include *chase cards*—extremely rare cards that are so named because collectors “chase” them—that get inserted into only a handful of packs. What makes the cards special? Well, you might find cards printed on special material (such as the clear plastic cards in *Fullmetal Alchemist*). Other chase cards may carry the same name and title as a regular card, but alternate artwork or a different layout gives the card a special look—and sometimes a serious price tag on the secondary market, too.

The best limited-edition cards don’t come in booster packs at all. Instead, you get them free by

attending some kind of special event sponsored by the game company. To latch onto these cool cards, attend one of the summer conventions, win a tournament, play a game against a company staffer (usually at one of the big summer conventions—yet another reason to attend), or just join the fun in a prerelease tournament.

Many companies offer league play through your local store, which makes another easy way to get limited-edition cards. Although the winners always get a cool item, *everybody* who plays in a regular league traditionally goes home with something. That makes leagues a great place to start your limited-edition card collection!

Shortly after a collectible game hits the market, the manufacturer puts out a release schedule so the players know when the next batch of cards is set to come out. This primes players with excitement about both the game itself and the prospect of things to come. A consistent three- to four-month release schedule keeps the excitement high and the players consistently buying, so most game companies use that schedule.

Assembling, Sorting, and Enjoying Your Collection

Although it might surprise you, sitting down to actually *play* a trading card game is only *half* the fun of this hobby. The other half revolves around collecting, trading, studying, and generally fiddling with your cards. In their own way, the “between games” aspects of a trading card game form a world unto themselves!

People get involved in trading card games for all sorts of reasons—it spans a broad continuum of activities. Some folks *only* collect the cards—they never actually play the game. Maybe they want a complete set of every single card ever made for the game, or perhaps they just like owning cards that depict

their favorite characters from the game's universe. Whatever the reason, they buy, sell, and trade cards with abandon, but disdain actually *using* the cards for anything other than pieces of art.

Other people avidly enjoy the competitive play side of these games. They spend lots of time poring over the cards, studying the card text and the game rules, and endlessly sorting and re-sorting their cards (at least that's what *I* did). The buying, trading, and collecting portions of the game represent a means to an end. As they acquire more cards, they expand the possibilities of their playing decks and grow stronger in the game.

Regardless of what drives your particular interest in the games, you need to take good care of your cards. That's where the collecting, sorting, and protecting aspects of the collectible game hobby get important.

The trek into the trading card game hobby starts with collecting the cards, figures, chips, or whatever your game uses for playing pieces. You probably began your collection with a starter set, a few boosters, and perhaps a handful of spare stuff donated by someone you met at your Friendly Local Game Store. At first, your stuff fit into whatever handy storage device you found at home — often a lidded plastic container from the kitchen. Although that's enough to get you started, if you plan on getting serious about your game, you really need to look at more serious ways of storing your cards.



Although it sounds strange to the uninitiated, long-time players often simply *give* new people a bunch of game materials for free. It happens quite a lot, really. Serious players end up with a lot of duplicate gamepieces. Rather than store and transport all of that stuff, they usually give it away to interested new players. It's a win-win situation. The new people appreciate the gift because it jump-starts their new collection; the advanced player likes giving stuff away because it encourages the new person to get deeper into the game, reinforces the sense of community among the players, and (most importantly) frees up storage space so the advanced player can go get *new* stuff.

In addition to keeping your cards safe from harm, your storage system needs to *organize* the cards into some sort of useful order — usually by card number, although you might choose to sort everything according to card type. Randomly throwing cards into a mundane, generic box not only risks damaging the cards, but it also makes the task of *finding* a particular card just about impossible. Whether you plan to admire or analyze your cards, a good storage system puts those cards at your fingertips while keeping your fingertips (and all of that nasty skin oil) off the cards.

Here's a quick look at the most common tools for storing and organizing your fledgling game collection:

- ✓ **Card boxes:** Begin with a couple of basic white card boxes. They cost very little, they last pretty well, and they never go out of style. You buy card boxes according to the number of cards that fit into them. I'm fond

of the 300- and 660-card sizes because they always seem to hold the right amount of stuff without overdoing it. As your collection grows, you can either purchase spares of your favorite size or shift into larger boxes. These boxes work great for constructible miniatures games as well — and do a passable job holding prepainted miniatures, too.

- ✓ **Portfolio binder:** The clear plastic pages in a portfolio binder keep your cards away from harm while letting you easily read them. Because the pages are built into the binder, a portfolio can take some abuse without losing any parts. These come with either four- or nine-pocket pages, depending on how many cards you want to hold in a single binder.
- ✓ **Three-ring binders with nine-pocket pages:** Serious players live and die by their three-ring binders. Some people practically keep office supply stores in business with the number of binders they buy. To turn these innocent office staples into powerful card-organizing tools, add nine-pocket pages from one of the protection-product companies, like BCW (<http://bcwsupplies.com>) and UltraPro (www.ultra-pro.com). Most local games stores stock card storage supplies.



For far more information than most people ever need on the topic of card protection, flip to Chapter 18. It gets into the nitty-gritty details of binders, deck boxes, and storage systems. Plus, it introduces the single most important weapon in your card-protection arsenal: deck protectors!

Analyzing Strengths, Weaknesses, Economy, and Combinations

Although you need solid gameplay skills to win at these games, you also need to invest time figuring out what the cards do and how they interact with each other. Discerning each card's basic strengths and weaknesses marks the first step toward developing deck-building strategies in the game. As your playing ability in the game grows, you discover how to look beyond the basic stats to see cards in terms of how they relate to the ebb and flow of the game. This kind of skill comes in time, but it starts with a solid knowledge of your game's basics.

Your first step toward evaluating the in-game power of the cards in your collection begins not by fiddling with the cards, but rather by diving into the game's rule book. Knowing how the game plays gives you a framework for figuring out each card's real power. If you don't understand the game, you can't judge the cards.



Keep the rule book handy during your first few games. When questions come up in the game, grab the book and find the answer. *Never* worry about referring to the rules as you play. Checking the rules when in doubt is a good habit to get into, regardless of whether you play at home with your friends or competitively in your local store or at game conventions.

With the rules firmly in mind, start looking through your cards. At this point in the process, pay attention to the basic stats on each card — stuff like the numbers that indicate one card's strength relative to another — rather than the game text. When learning a new game, the stats make the most sense at first. They're numbers, so they generally speak for themselves. High numbers usually mean strength; low numbers traditionally mean weakness. It's pretty simple.

Game text, on the other hand, deals with how the cards interact with each other. If you've played only one or two games thus far, you're still learning the basic mechanics; things like which phase comes next and how many cards you draw on a turn dominate your thoughts. After you internalize the game's basic concepts, each card's game text will make a lot more sense.

As you look at card statistics, remember that each card in a well-designed game includes a balance between its raw power and its cost. If you find a card with a high strength and defense, then it probably costs a lot of resources to bring that card into the game. Something with a very low resource cost probably can't fight its way out of a paper bag. When you see a card that seems to break this rule — one with a high power and a low resource cost, for instance — the card's game text usually keeps things in balance by reducing the card's value in some other way.

By the time you feel confident with the game mechanics and understand the card statistics, you naturally start discovering how each card's game text affects the game. Most cards derive their true power from both their game text and from the game text of other cards played in combination with them.

Grasping how a card's stats and game text interact leads you to that nirvana of game moments when you can gauge a card's *economy*. Economy in this case doesn't have anything to do with money (although very economic cards often command a good price on the singles market). Instead, think of it more as the card's *flexibility* during the game. A card that hits hard, defends well, and throws a curve at your opponent through its game text brings quite a lot of value to your playing deck. That's a very economic card. It packs a lot of punch into a single package.



Look for card economy as you build decks. Advanced players sometimes use the term *min-maxing* to describe the process of finding the most valuable cards for their strategy and matching them with the best helper cards. They *minimize* the number of cards necessary to make their strategy work, while *maximizing* the offensive and defensive power of the deck.

Getting in Touch with Your Inner Timmy, Johnny, and Spike

Everybody loves winning a game — nobody denies that. But opinions vary wildly when you get to the details of *how* to win. A lot of the reasoning behind how you view winning a game comes from deep in your psyche. In fact, it starts with a much simpler question: *Why do you play this game?*

Several years ago, the folks at a company called Wizards of the Coast pondered this very question. They wondered why some collectible games exploded in popularity while others fizzled from the start, and why players stuck with one game over another. These thoughts and questions led them to the ultimate issue of what motivates people to play trading card games.

After many years of study, they identified three basic types of players. Although they originally thought of these people strictly as aficionados of *Magic: The Gathering*, these three profiles really represent archetypes of players in the industry. Every player out there either falls squarely into one of these three categories or splits his time between two of them.

For reasons now lost in the mists of history, the people on the Wizards team named each archetype. Rather than coming up with impressive Latin-sounding names like the Road Runner animators did at the beginning of their cartoons, they tacked a simple nickname onto each type — a name that captured the essence of that particular player type for them. Thus were born the trading card industry's three classic players: Johnny, Timmy, and Spike.

Here's a look at what makes each archetype tick:

- ✔ **Johnny** tells stories through his decks. He loves trading card games because they let him show off his style and creativity. Inventiveness counts highly for him. Rather than copy other people's ideas, he tests the cards that others might shun. By putting together unwieldy combinations of cards, he sometimes creates something powerful that nobody else has found. If he wins one in every ten games, he feels pleased with his accomplishment.
- ✔ **Timmy** likes power — *big* power. He likes winning by fielding the most amazingly awesome and imposingly powerful thing you ever saw in your whole freaking life! (Ahem . . . sorry, I got carried away there). He wants a big, crushing win, complete with pyrotechnics and a screaming electric

guitar solo. But at the same time, he's happy if his deck beats you about three times out of ten. Yet at the same time, Timmy loves the social aspect of playing these games. He mostly enjoys hanging out with his friends, and occasionally *absolutely crushing them to dust* with his deck.

- ✔ For **Spike**, the serious tournament player, winning is everything. If Spike doesn't win, he might as well not play. Precisely *how* he wins doesn't really matter — winning itself is the goal. Spike spends a lot of time *min-maxing* his deck until it runs like a machine — an unbeatable little thrashing machine of victory. Storyline, combinations, and power cards mean nothing to him unless they help him *win the game*. If Spike doesn't come out on top in 90 percent of his games, he gets unhappy.

As for me, I tend toward the “Johnny” profile, using a weird combination of cards that nobody normally uses but that come together into something amazingly neat every now and then. One of my most-loved *Star Wars* decks (which my friends still taunt me about years later) involved a whopping seven-card combination that created a portable vacuum that sucked characters into the lair of the trash compactor monster from the original *Star Wars* movie. Although the combination rarely worked, the sheer joy of hearing my opponent exclaim “You made a *portable Dianoga*?!” on those rare occasions when I got all of the cards onto the table made the losses completely worthwhile. Yup, I'm a total Johnny.

Attack of the Killer Cheese Turtle: The Many Paths to a Win

Because of how collectible card games work — particularly how the cards interact with each other — several basic strategies have emerged over the years. You see these general strategies in every card game on the market. Although the details of how the strategy works depend a lot on the game itself, you can easily see the broad brushstrokes of a particular strategy every time you play against it.

The following bullets outline the six basic strategies awaiting you, along with the player archetype that most often runs this type of deck:

- ✔ **All-out attack (Spike):** These decks want to burn your world to the ground. They focus on fast attacks and lots of damage, followed up with still more attacks causing even greater damage. Your opponent wants you to subconsciously flinch every time a card hits the table because the card *might* inflict even *more* damage to you. You get the idea.
- ✔ **Defense and denial (Johnny, or Spike on a bad day):** You can sum up denial decks in a single word: “No.” Does your opponent want to play a character? No. Does he want to put out a resource card? Denied. Was that an immediate play card that just popped out of his hand? Deleted!

These decks shut down your opponent's actions while quietly motoring toward victory in their own way. Beware your opponent's reaction to this deck type, though, because many people really, really, *really* dislike playing against denial decks.

- ✔ **Balance (all):** If you want a “normal” trading card game experience, then here's the place to start. These decks carry attack and defense cards in proportions that the designer actually recommends. They don't stretch any game rules or gameplay elements to the breaking point, and yet they still win their fair share of games. Balanced decks bring simple peace and harmony to the world around them. (Perhaps one will run for President some day.)
- ✔ **Big combination (Johnny and Timmy):** In this style of play, the deck builder brings out either a single all-powerful card that gets backup from an array of smaller cards, or he attempts to finesse the victory through an elegant combination of far, far too many cards. Both Johnny and Timmy love combinations for their own reasons, although I think the honors go to Johnny for “combinations above and beyond the call of sanity.”
- ✔ **Cheese (Timmy and Spike):** The stuff from the dairy counter makes my mouth water and my willpower melt, but when it comes in the form of a trading card game strategy, these decks just make you want to spit. A *cheese deck* (called cheese because they're cheesy — they're so silly they make other players groan in good-natured agony) relies on some innocent little card which, when used as the designers envisioned, accomplishes some relatively mundane task. So far, so good (but you can probably tell that this story doesn't end on a happy note). A cheese deck takes that innocent little card, adds some unexpected combination plays, and turbo-charges the little card in ways that Man Was Not Meant To Know. Suddenly, the mischievous squirrel that dropped nuts on your head turns into a 500-foot-tall Atomic Squirrel-O-Tron of Doom — and he's mad.
- ✔ **Turtle (Johnny and Spike):** Turtles don't move very fast. In fact, they stroll along at a rate that makes all sorts of thick, gooey liquids look like racehorses. In deck building, a turtle deck plays much the same way as it inflicts all sorts of delays on its opponent. The turtle's goal involves preventing the opponent from accomplishing too awfully much in the early portion of the game, which gives the turtle time to get its act together. When the turtle finishes her preparations, however, watch out — she's on the warpath!



Don't be surprised if some of these deck types bring out weird reactions from your opponent. Everybody sees the world from his or her own perspective, which may or may not match yours. A lot of the reaction depends on what player archetype (Johnny, Timmy, or Spike, mentioned earlier in the chapter) your opponent follows. The hard-core tournament player respects someone who beats him, regardless of what type of strategy did the beating. If you play an all-out attack deck that doesn't respect the game's story against someone who's actually in it more for the story than for the win, your opponent might not take that well.

Chapter 3

Getting into the Right Game for You

In This Chapter

- ▶ Asking some basic questions
 - ▶ Ferreting out your desires by digging deeper
 - ▶ Trying something completely different
-

Looking through the shelves of a collectible game display these days feels like finding yourself in the middle of a gigantic buffet immediately after discovering that food exists. Everywhere you turn, colorful packages beckon to you. Anime games, sports games, historical games, movie games, and more — choices, choices, and more choices! How can you possibly find a game that's right for you among the cacophony of competing pastimes?

Truth be told, winnowing down the possibilities takes less time than you think — but you *do* need to ask yourself some questions you probably never thought you'd be asking yourself. When I jumped into trading card games for the first time, I never expected things like the age of the game and the number of expansions to affect my decision, yet those factors — and other obscure details like them — can make or break your game choices.

This chapter walks through the game-selection process with you. It helps you ask the right questions and ultimately pick the best match for your personal style of play. It considers the physical type of game (cards, miniatures, and so on), the depth and longevity of the game, and even things like organized play programs and the possibility of exploring some out-of-print games. Regardless of your age and your interests, you can find help right here.



Parents, guardians, and caregivers can use the information in this chapter to help guide young hearts and minds toward a fun and appropriate game. Remember to give children plenty of latitude, but at the same time help them find something that's age-appropriate. And remember: It's totally okay if they simply want to get some cards or other gamepieces and make up their own game with them. Whether they ultimately get interested in the game itself or not, support their creativity and let them play!

Starting with the Obvious Questions

No matter what you do, it always pays to begin at the beginning. This sounds like obvious advice (even to me, and I'm not that deep of a thinker), but it's easy to overlook the most obvious things sometimes — particularly in the heat of excitement as you dive into a new game. Asking the obvious questions as you pick your game means that you start the selection process with the best and most personalized information possible.



When evaluating your game options, think through the following questions first. Don't put a *lot* of thought and effort into these, though, because they're just the basic questions. (The more complicated ones come later, so save your big thoughts for them.) Here goes:

- ✔ **What do you really enjoy about a game?** When you get ready for a game, what really pumps you up about playing? Do you long for the competition? Do you want to test your latest clever deck design on some unsuspecting opponent? Maybe you just like getting together with your friends for an evening of fun. Some games support a broad variety of drives (you can play for fun or for competition, for instance — *Pokémon* is a good example of a game that can be casual or highly competitive), but others lend themselves more to one style of play than another. If you get into a serious tournament-driven game when you really enjoy a more casual approach, then you won't enjoy the game for very long. Ask some folks in your Friendly Local Game Store for insights about how people play the various games on your short list of possibilities. The insight you glean could save you both time and money.
- ✔ **What games do your friends play?** If all of your friends really get into one particular game, like *Magic: The Gathering*, but you want to play *Legend of the Five Rings*, then get ready to butt heads with your buddies. It's possible to lead a game lover into a new game from his or her current one, but it takes a lot of time and energy. Unless you utterly loathe the game, try sticking to a game that your friends also enjoy. And if you *do* detest their game, jump-start the chances of a transition by picking up some demonstration decks from a local game store. If the store owner helps you convert your friends to a new game, reward him with your business. (After all, he *did* save your friendship!)
- ✔ **Which games do the local stores support?** This one goes hand in hand with the previous question. If none of your local stores support the game of your dreams with tournaments (or sometimes even with a product for sale), then how can you get serious about a game? In this case, talk to the local retailer about picking up the game. Commit to buying product from him. Ask whether any of his suppliers offer a returnability deal to encourage him to give new games a try. Offer to volunteer as a judge or demonstration person for the game to promote it at the store. Don't just stand there looking dejected — *do something!*

✓ **How much depth do you like in a game?** Some players love the intricate twists and turns of a game that has more depth than several ocean trenches. Others prefer a pastime with all the strategic challenge of an afternoon sunning on the beach. This has nothing to do with the number of cards or pieces in each set (that's in the next section of this chapter). Rather, the depth refers to how much thought it takes to create, tune, and play a solid deck. The more effort the design and planning process requires, the more depth in the game. Choose wisely because nobody knows how much thinking you enjoy better than you do.

Part III, “Shuffling through the Rest of the Decks,” provides an overview of most of the games on the market and is arranged, for your convenience, by game categories that should make it easy for you to begin narrowing down your choices. If one of those really speaks to you, then give the game a go! If none of them strikes your fancy quite yet, don't get frustrated; just keep looking. The game of your heart awaits you out there somewhere. You'll find it.



If one or two games *look* really interesting, invest \$20 or so in each one to give it a try. Also, try asking an established player or two to loan you a deck so you can try the game at a level beyond the normal “demonstration” game. Every gamer wants new people to start playing his game, so that approach works very well most of the time.

Getting Personal

Sometimes you just can't *quite* find what you want. You've worked through all of the basic questions and talked to your friends — you've even asked your Friendly Local Game Store owner what she recommends. Despite all of that, you just can't make up your mind.



Taking your time to find a game is completely okay — really it is. You just want to find the right game for you, and you're willing to wait for it. (And considering the amount of money that most people spend on trading card games, patience makes a *really* wise approach.) It's far better to take your time and connect with one game rather than throw a lot of money away by repeatedly diving headlong into game after game. (Not that I ever did that . . . more than once . . . over time . . . like several years and many, many games. Goodness no. Of course not. But enough about me — let's get back to your game hunt.)

If you're still stumped for a game that meets your needs, then you need to look beyond the skin-deep issues and dive into some personal questions about your style of play.

To help you narrow the search a bit, try answering the following questions:

- ✔ **Do you want to play with miniatures or with cards?** Some people absolutely love the *snap* of deck protector-covered cards in their hands. Others prefer to lord over an army of warriors arrayed on a grand (albeit small) 3-D battlefield. Whichever way you want to go and whatever genre you want to enjoy, lots of game options await you. Remember that these games require vastly different storage requirements, though. Don't get into a miniatures game unless your house includes space for both you *and* your collection.
- ✔ **Are you an early adopter or a late bloomer?** When a game first hits the market, the players who dive in early get the best rewards (namely, seeing the game in its first stage and contributing input to the game manufacturer on its future), but they also face the greatest uncertainty (after all, *most* new games never make it to "old game" status). Still, there's something cool about joining the leading edge of the wave into a newly released game. If you love riding that wave, then scour magazines like *InQuest Gamer* and *Scrye* for the latest news on soon-to-be-released games. When you find a likely prospect, watch the game company's Web site for information about prerelease tournaments. There's nothing like *really* playing the game first!
- ✔ **Do you want to collect lots of things or just a few?** This goes hand in hand with the preceding question about diving into a game as it starts or waiting until it matures a bit. With a new game, there's only *so much* to collect because very few things exist yet. An established game comes complete with plenty of different sets and lots of special limited-edition items — it's a collector's dream (or nightmare, depending on the perspective)! Because collecting makes up such an important part of playing any of these games, be sure to spend some time considering how much you enjoy that aspect of the game.
- ✔ **Does organized play pique your interest?** Most game companies offer some sort of formal tournament system that offers competition, prizes, and a shot at attending higher-level tournaments around the country (and sometimes around the world). Organized play starts at local game stores and clubs with regularly scheduled tournaments. Those typically tie into state or regional championships, which lead to national events. The big summer conventions almost always include tournaments with special prize packages or other honors for the players. If the thought of owning rare tournament prizes and earning the glory of a high-stakes win excites you, then look for companies that sponsor active organized play programs. Your local game store can help you find them.



If you *still* can't decide what game to play, then you're thinking about this *way* too hard. In that case, go with your first instinct and start playing something. You'll have fun — trust me!

It's not dead yet — the joy of out-of-print games

Like the old song says, “Everything old is new again.” That saying fits the world of trading card games perfectly. With new games coming out all year long, not every game on the market survives into old age. A great many die quickly and quietly after just a few releases. Many of these really *aren't* bad games, either. Maybe they just hit the market at an inopportune time or they included mechanics that didn't mesh well with the current buying audience. But whatever the reason that the game died, its untimely demise could turn into a boon for you.

After a game drops off the mainstream radar, the price of cards drops quickly. Instead of paying

\$10 for a starter deck, the same amount of money might get you a whole *display* of starters! If you shop carefully, you might even pick up someone's entire collection for very little money, giving you everything you need for a long, happy time as a player.

You can usually find good closeout deals at the big summer conventions. Look for companies that specialize in old trading card games. You can't miss their booths — just keep an eye out for the ones with the big stacks of booster boxes!

Switching to a Brave New World

Long-time collectible game players know the joy of playing their favorite games, but what happens when boredom creeps in and the game's challenge fades away? Turn your attention elsewhere and try something new and different!

It sounds easy, but diving into a new game isn't for the faint of heart. You've spent a lot of time focused on your current game. You figured out the strategies, you developed combinations, and you collected and traded your way to a strong bench of cards. You've spent hours honing your skills and deducing the playing styles of your regular competition. Switching to a new game means turning your back on a lot of that work and starting from scratch.



Are you ready for that sort of change? Well, the fact that you're reading this probably means that you are — and that's completely okay. Some players live and breathe their favorite game for years and years (*Magic: The Gathering* players in particular fall into that category), and that's great for them. Others devote a couple of years to competitive play and then disconnect from the game because of rule changes, new play styles, or simple boredom. As for me, I prefer the unexplored territory of a newly released game, so I tend to switch more often than some players. It just depends on your taste.

If you're considering switching to a new game, take the time to really look at what's on the market. Don't limit yourself exclusively to the type of game you always played in the past. If you focused on trading card games for a long time, take a miniatures game for a spin. Get out of your comfort zone and check out the newest concepts. You might run across something that truly captures your imagination!



The summer game conventions make a perfect time to sample and select new games. Companies preview and release a lot of new games during Origins and Gen Con — the two major summer conventions. Origins is put on by GAMA (the Game Manufacturer's Association), and it happens in late June or early July each year in Columbus, Ohio. You can get more information at the conference Web site (www.originsgames.com). Gen Con is short for Geneva Convention because it originated in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, but now there are two shows — one in Indianapolis, Indiana, in August and one in Anaheim, California, in November. Get more info at the Gen Con Web site (www.gencon.com). Picking up something at one of the shows gives you an advantage over the competition at home, plus it marks you as a trendsetting “alpha gamer” among your local crowd — and that brings social rewards by itself.

Why not give a new game a try? You never know what's out there until you see for yourself. Talk to your local game store, check in with industry sources, and ask other players at the online discussion boards. You might discover the next really hot game!

Part II

Introducing the Big Six

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"Yu-Gi-Oh to bed young man or you're going to have a magic gathering with your father when he gets home."

In this part . . .

They're everywhere you look: In college sports, it's the Big Ten. In accounting, it's the Big Four (at least this month). In car manufacturing, it's the Big Three (plus the Fairly Large Four and the Bigger-Than-You-Think Two). But in the world of collectible games, it's definitely the *Big Six*.

Lots of games glow brightly and then quickly grow dark in the gaming market, but a few just keep going and going. This part looks at the current group of top games in the industry. Some earned their place by virtue of the size of the player base, while others got there because of their ability to keep attracting new players over the long haul. Whatever the reason, these games make great introductions to all facets of the collectible game hobby.

Each chapter in this part looks at one game in depth, starting with a run through the game's history and its back-story. From there, it delves into card types, deck-building, basic strategy, and available expansions — enough information for you to understand how the game works, figure out if you might enjoy it, and know what to ask for in the stores.

After diving into one of these chapters, see if you can find a local store that gives demonstrations or holds tournaments and open game times. That's the best way to get started in whichever game grabs your interest.

Chapter 4

Beginning Where It All Started — with *Magic: The Gathering*

In This Chapter

- ▶ A whole new type of game, straight from the mind of a math professor
 - ▶ *Magic's* colossal creatures and stupendous spells
 - ▶ Hand-to-hand dueling — across the table
 - ▶ *Magic's* many sets and settings, from Arabia to Ravnica
 - ▶ Constructing a killer deck
 - ▶ Beefing up the forces and widening your wizardry
 - ▶ Taking *Magic* to the Net and beyond
-

It's hard to beat an original, and when it comes to *Magic: The Gathering*, that certainly rings true — at least in the world of trading card games. *Magic* is the oldest game of its kind, and it's still the most popular more than a dozen years after it first took the gaming world by storm back in 1993.

When a math professor named Richard Garfield first designed the game, he had no idea it would catch on with millions of gamers, both at the casual and tournament levels. A simple-to-learn yet strategically deep game, it has exploded from the original set of 300 cards to a vast array of 7,000 (and growing) cards, with billions of copies printed worldwide.

What has caused *Magic* to last so long and to build its legions of fans worldwide? Well, it roped in the role player types who can't get enough of wizards, dragons, elves, and other fantasy characters. Hard-core gamers loved it for its ever-changing strategy. And collectors loved it for the cool artwork, shiny foils, and the chance to find the next Microsoft among the penny-stock cards. But most of all, it's just danged fun.

The Magic Started Here

When Garfield originally envisioned *Magic*, he thought that it would basically be a game that people would play in their basements, with each player using the small number of cards they'd snagged in a starter deck and a few boosters. It didn't take long for that theory to be proven dead wrong, as players were buying cards by the box and case from the very first print run. Publisher Wizards of the Coast's original run of cards was meant to last several months but sold out in just a few weeks.

This explosion of popularity — coupled with the hoarding nature of card buyers generally — greatly affected the game itself. Without an advanced network of play testers for the original game, a good number of super-powerful — or “broken” in *Magic* lingo — cards made their way into the early sets. Rare cards that were meant to show up once in every few players' decks suddenly appeared with alarming frequency as multiple copies in the same deck.

Fortunately, the times changed quickly to make the game fairer, more balanced, and more enjoyable to all players. Rules restricting all cards to just four copies in any single deck soon made for a more level playing field, and the super-powerful cards were restricted to one copy or simply banned from play. Over the years, *Magic*'s subsequent designers have built in more rigorous testing schemes as well, and the DCI — the Duelists' Convocation International, *Magic*'s organized play administration — keeps a close eye on making sure that overly strong cards don't ruin tournament play.

Nowadays, you've got all sorts of great play formats for *Magic*, with new ones coming out all the time. And not only can you still play in your basement, but you can also take a deck to any local game store and, odds are, you'll find someone who's ready to duel with you. Of course, it might help a bit if you find out how to play the game first!

Deciphering the Mysteries of the Cards

In *Magic*, you represent a great wizard, called a *planeswalker*, who reaches into his vast library to summon forth creatures and cast spells in order to attack and defeat an opposing wizard by reducing his or her *life total* from 20 to 0 before he or she does it to you. The core game mechanics of *Magic* revolve around the idea of harnessing *mana*, or magical energy, from lands and other sources in order to power these spells and creatures. The longer a game progresses, the more resources a wizard can use and the more powerful everything he or she summons forth becomes.

Cards in *Magic* exist in one of five different colors: white, blue, black, red, and green. The five colors form a pentagon in that order on the back of all *Magic*

cards, illustrating which of the colors are “friendly” with each other and which are “enemies.” Each color (no surprise here) has its own theme, as I describe in the following list:

- ✔ **White** represents law and order as well as healing. But the “good guys” aren’t the only ones marked as white; you’re just as likely to see mindless legions of soldiers and dictatorial rulers on white cards as you are to see angels and medics. White is friendly to green and blue and an enemy of black and red.
- ✔ **Blue** is the color of artifice and trickery. You’ll find lots of wizards and lots of funky spells here. Air and water creatures mostly find their homes here, too. Blue is friendly to white and black and an enemy of red and green.
- ✔ **Black** is the self-serving color as well as the color of death. Creatures here are out to further their own goals first and foremost. Similar to white, you won’t find just the “bad guys” here either. Sure, there are plenty of evil black demons, zombies, and sorcerers here, but you’ll also find mercenaries with a bent for independence and free thought. Black is friendly to blue and red and an enemy of green and white.
- ✔ **Red** is the most aggressive of the five colors, focusing on speedy and chaotic creatures and fiery spells. Goblins, ogres, and many other Chaotic species are red, as both their lack of brains and their eager willingness to attack play up to the color’s theme. Red is friendly to black and green and an enemy of white and blue.
- ✔ **Green** is the color of life and nature. Elves and faeries abound here, as do larger beasts. It’s the best color at generating mana in multiples as well as at diversifying into other colors of mana. Green is friendly to red and white and an enemy of blue and black.

I’d like that rare, please

Early *Magic* cards had no physical way to distinguish among rarities; instead, you had to either find a checklist somewhere or crack tons of packs and piece together the info. After 1998, though, it became a lot easier:

- ✔ Cards with a **black** expansion symbol are common, appearing 11 times per 15-card booster pack and about 32 times per 75-card tournament pack.
- ✔ **Silver** symbols denote uncommon cards, which come 3 per booster and about 10 times per tournament pack.

- ✔ **Gold** symbols show that a card is rare; it appears just once per booster or three per tournament pack, with the remainder of tournament packs taken up by basic lands.

Additionally, every card since 1999 has had a parallel foil version of it that is much rarer than the regular version. Promotional versions of select cards have also been given out as tournament prizes, as league participation incentives, and as compensation to organized play judges and staff. These usually have a foil treatment and sometimes have cool alternate art as well.

Some decks utilize cards of just one of these colors, while others may combine all five of them. Additionally, *Magic* cards are broken down into the following six major categories:

- ✓ **Land** cards are the resources that you use to generate mana — the units of magical energy that you'll be using to unleash your creatures and cast your spells. The most common lands — called *basic lands* — each produce one color of mana, and they're the only cards in the game that you can have an unlimited number of in your deck. **Forest**, shown in Figure 4-1, produces green mana. The other basic lands are **Plains**, which produces white mana; **Island**, which makes blue; **Swamp**, which generates black; and **Mountain**, which creates red.

Basic lands have the simplest layouts of any *Magic* cards. On the top left is the card's *name*, and in the bottom *text box* is simply the symbol for the type of mana it produces; **Forest**'s tree symbol indicates that it produces green mana. (Other lands, called *nonbasic lands*, have other effects that appear in that box instead.) On **Forest**'s left side, below the picture, is the *card type* (Land) preceded by its *supertype* (Basic) and followed by its *subtype* (**Forest**). These denote that the card can key off other cards that mention basic lands or **Forests**. On the right side is **Forest**'s *expansion symbol* — the number 9 inside a hand of cards — which shows that this particular version is from the *Ninth Edition* base set; most every *Magic* set has a unique identifying symbol like this one. And at the bottom of the card are the *card artist's name*, *copyright info*, and *collector's number*; these have no bearing on gameplay but help out collectors.

- ✓ **Creature** cards are the backbone of most decks because they're the forces that you summon forth to battle for you. **Goblin Brigand**, shown in Figure 4-2, is a typical creature you might run across when you crack a *Ninth Edition* booster pack. Most of its layout mirrors that of a land card, with a couple of important differences. Creatures, as well as all other nonland cards, have a *mana cost* in the top-right corner; this shows how much and what type of mana you need to pay for it. In the case of **Goblin Brigand**, you need two mana; the fireball symbol indicates that you specifically need one red mana, and the circled 1 denotes that you can pay for the second with any color of mana.

In addition to the **Goblin Brigand**'s type, shown below the picture, and its *ability*, explained in its text box — it must attack during every turn if it can — its card has two numbers in the bottom-right corner. The first number is its *power*, which shows how strong its attacks are. The second number is the Brigand's *toughness*, which shows how well it holds up to opposing attacks. If a creature's toughness ever becomes 0, it dies immediately.

Figure 4-1: Forest cards harness the powers of life and nature to produce green mana in *Magic*.



Figure 4-2: **Goblin Brigand** is a typical mindless, free-swinging grunt for a red *Magic* army.



✓ **Artifact** cards represent the relics created by the mages throughout *Magic's* history. Instead of having a color (like creatures and other non-land cards), they're colorless; this means that a) you can pay for their costs with any color of mana and b) they're not affected by any other cards that only affect cards of a particular color. **Rod of Ruin**, shown in Figure 4-3, is a typical artifact. Its mana cost of 4 means that you can pay any combination of four mana to play it. In the text box, you'll see that its ability has an activation cost of 3, meaning that you need to pay any combination of three mana in order to use its ability of dealing one damage point. But there's more to that cost; next to that 3 is the *tap symbol*, a bent arrow. This means that you also must *tap* the **Rod of Ruin** — turn it sideways from its normal straight-up (*untapped*) position — in order to use the ability. This shows that you've exhausted your ability to use the **Rod of Ruin** again for the remainder of a given turn.

Many other cards include the tap symbol as well; basic lands don't have it, but you *do* need to tap them in order to generate mana of the appropriate color. Also, *artifact creatures* (as the name implies) share the characteristics of both creature and artifact cards; you can pay for their costs with any color of mana, but they also attack just like any other creature.

✓ **Enchantment** cards represent the mystical forces that often have broad continuous effects on the game while they're in play. Many of these are played straight to the board — I go over this layout soon — while other ones with the subtype *aura* are played on another card in play and affect just that card. **Flight**, seen in Figure 4-4, is an aura enchantment that gives a creature the ability to fly — a way to make its attacks harder to defend against. It costs a single blue mana to play, represented by the drop of water in the top-right corner. Aura enchantment cards like **Flight** remain on the enchanted creature while that creature stays in play, but are placed into your graveyard (your discard pile) if the creature leaves play.

✓ **Instant** cards involve a type of spell that can have a surprise effect on the game, and you can play them at basically any point in the game. Unlike the previous four card types — which stay in play until destroyed and which are collectively known as *permanents* — instant cards are played, resolved, and then put into the *graveyard*, the game's discard pile. **Giant Growth**, shown in Figure 4-5, is a common instant card that costs a single green mana to play. Its effect pumps up the creature that you *target* with it by increasing both the target's power and toughness by 3 each (+3/+3). This makes it much fiercer in combat.

✓ **Sorcery** cards, the last main card type, work in much the same way as instant cards, except you can play them only during certain phases of the game. **Coercion**, seen in Figure 4-6, is a black sorcery card that costs a single black mana plus two mana of any type. It's a particularly nasty card; it lets you not only peek at your opponent's *hand* — the place where he holds his cards before playing them — but it also lets you force him or her to discard one card that you choose.

Figure 4-3:
Rod of Ruin
is an artifact
that can
be used to
damage both
creatures
and players.



Figure 4-4:
Flight
makes its
enchanted
creature
harder to
defend
against
when it
attacks.



Figure 4-5:
Giant Growth is a nice way to surprise your opponent during creature combat.



Figure 4-6:
Coercion is a good way to strip an opponent of his or her most potent threat.



Taking the Game for a Quick Spin

Before you go through the phases and steps of a typical *Magic* turn, you need to understand the layout of the board. The game has these six main *zones*:

- ✓ Your **hand** is where you hold your cards during a game. You start the game with seven cards in your hand and must discard down to that number at the end of any turn if you're holding more cards than that. Only you can see your hand, and only your opponents can see their hands — unless you have a cool spell like **Coercion** to get around that!
- ✓ The **library** is the deck from which you draw more cards during each turn. Normally, you draw a single card each time around, but many spells and abilities allow you to draw more.
- ✓ The **in-play zone** is where all of the action happens. It's the zone to which you play your permanents, and where your creatures do battle with your opponent's creatures. It's shared between both players.
- ✓ The **graveyard** is your discard pile. Each player has his or her own graveyard, and it's where you place resolved spells and destroyed permanents. It's not totally out of play, though, because numerous cards let you resurrect cards from your graveyard.
- ✓ The **removed-from-game** zone, however, is way out of play. Certain cards place other cards here because such cards might have abilities deemed too strong if they sent them to the graveyard instead. Of course, there are even a few cards, called *wishes*, that break this rule and allow you to bring back cards from here, too.



Many cards in *Magic* break the rules of the game. When this happens, follow *Magic*'s Golden Rule: When a card contradicts the rules, follow the text on the card first.

- ✓ Finally, the **stack** is an imaginary zone onto which both players place cards that they're playing. This gives each player the chance to respond to the playing of the card by playing other spells or abilities. When a player responds, he or she places the new spell on top of the stack. When everyone's done responding, you resolve the stack from the top down, so the last spell played resolves first. Instant spells and most abilities of permanents can be added to the stack at pretty much any time. Some cards can *counter* spells on the stack, which moves them straight from the stack to the graveyard without ever allowing them to resolve.



A few early cards used something called the *phased-out* zone, which acted like the removed-from-game zone, except cards shifted between it and the in-play zone every other turn and tracked their prior status when moving, rather than resetting like newly played cards. Also, some other early cards used the *ante* zone, where each player put the top card of his or her deck before starting play. Whoever won the game got to claim the ante cards. This was stopped after a few sets because Wizards of the Coast, the publishers behind *Magic*, didn't want the game to be seen as a form of gambling.

To win a game of *Magic*, you must achieve one of two chief goals: either be the first to reduce your opponent's life total from 20 to 0, or force him or her to attempt to draw a card from his or her library when there are no cards left in it. A few cards allow for other alternate win conditions, but these are the two most often seen. The game ends immediately when any of these win conditions are achieved.

At the beginning of the game, using whatever means you agree upon, you randomly choose a player who can then either play first — and skip drawing a card on his or her first turn — or play second and draw all cards normally. Each player shuffles his or her deck and then draws a hand of seven cards. A player who doesn't like his or her hand may *mulligan* by shuffling it back into the library and drawing a hand with one fewer card, repeating until he or she is happy with the drawn hand.

A turn in a game of *Magic* is made up of the following five different phases:

- ✓ **Beginning phase:** This is split up into the *untap*, *upkeep*, and *draw* steps. During the untap step, the first thing you do on each turn, you untap your cards — turn any tapped (horizontal) cards so they're facing vertically. During upkeep, you'll often have nothing to do, but some cards have effects or costs that are triggered later in the game. Finally, during the draw step, you draw a single card for the turn; remember, the first player skips this step on the first turn. Instant spells and most cards' abilities can be played during the upkeep and draw steps if you want, but not during untap.
- ✓ **First main phase:** This is the first chance you have to play a land card, which you can do once per turn. You can also play other permanents and sorcery cards now if you have enough mana to play them and if the stack is empty of other spells and abilities. Also, you may play land cards, other permanents and sorcery cards only on your own turn, not on your opponents' turns; remember, instants and abilities of permanents are the only ones that can be played at other times.

Land cards, enchantment cards, artifact cards, and creature cards are collectively called *permanents* because they stay in play until they are destroyed. Instant and sorcery cards are not permanents.

✓ **Combat phase:** Here's where much of the action happens. If you have one or more creatures in the in-play zone, you may have any number of them *attack* your opponent. When you declare your *attacker(s)*, tap them — turn them horizontal — to show that they're attacking. A creature must have been in play under your control continuously since the beginning of your turn in order to attack. Your opponent may then choose whether he or she wants to declare any of his or her creatures as *blockers* for your attackers. This stops attacking creatures from dealing damage directly to the defending player for that turn.

You don't need to tap a creature in order to block with it; it's simply assigned and can block right away after being played without having to wait a turn. A lone blocker may block only a single attacker, but more than one creature may team up to block a single attacker as well. After attackers and blockers are declared, each creature assigns damage equal to its power to the creature(s) with which it's in combat. Unblocked attackers assign such damage directly to the opponent. After this is done, you resolve combat damage in the following manner:

- Any creature that is dealt damage equal to or greater than its toughness is destroyed. Place it in the graveyard. Any excess damage is ignored.
- Any creature that takes less damage than its toughness survives. Nothing else happens right now, but be careful — the damage stays on the creature until the end of the turn, so further sources of damage can destroy the creature before then!
- Any damage that's assigned directly to the opponent is subtracted from that player's life total. So, if your opponent is at 20 life and you've successfully broken through with your 2/2 **Goblin Raider**, your opponent will now be at 18 life.

Instant spells and abilities may be played in between each of these combat steps, including between the assignment and the resolution of combat damage. This allows you to prevent damage or to save a creature by playing a spell such as **Giant Growth** in order to raise its toughness higher than the amount of damage assigned to it.

✓ **Second main phase:** This works in exactly the same way as the first main phase. If you've already played your land for the turn, you may not play one now. Often, you'll want to save your new creatures during the first main phase and play them now; this keeps your opponent in the dark until the last possible moment and might cause him or her to make blocks and other decisions that aren't as good as they could be.

✓ **End phase:** Some cards have abilities that are triggered by the end of a turn. Also, you remove all damage from creatures, clear any other effects — like **Giant Growth** — that last until the end of a turn, and discard down to seven cards if you've got more than that in your hand.

And that's all there is to it! After you end your turn, your opponent's turn begins immediately with his or her untap step, and then the game proceeds in the order I just described until one player wins. In a multiplayer game, the next turn starts with the player to the left of the one who just finished his or her turn.

Looking through the Recent (And Not-So-Recent) Releases

Magic: The Gathering has had nine editions of its base set — with generally 300 to 400 cards per set — released to date since the first one came out in 1993. Each edition of the basic set is made up by Wizards of the Coast, combining different cards from the many sets before them. *Magic* has also had about 40 expansions of anywhere from about 80 to nearly 400 cards per expansion. The base sets have mainly included the core cards needed to get new players into the game as well as “staple” cards that are used in many different decks, while the expansions involve more complex cards and introduce new abilities and concepts with each new release. Here's a rundown of *Magic's* many sets:

✓ **Limited Edition:** Broken down into two printings, an error-filled one called *Alpha* and a larger, corrected one called *Beta*, this was the original base set, encompassing about 300 cards. The set included many of *Magic's* iconic creatures like **Serra Angel**, **Sengir Vampire**, and **Shivan Dragon**, as well as super-powerful cards like **Black Lotus**, an artifact card that costs nothing to play but could be sacrificed (destroyed intentionally by its controller) to produce three mana of any color. Many cards from these sets are worth tens or hundreds of dollars; the **Black Lotus** alone can go for a couple thousand!

The *Unlimited Edition* followed up on these several months later, replacing the black borders of *Alpha* and *Beta* with white ones but leaving the card pool the same.

These sets also introduced basic creature abilities like flying, a way for creatures to evade blockers, and *first strike*, a way for creatures to deal combat damage first before opposing creatures ever got to assign it. (When a creature with first strike is blocking or blocked by a creature without it, you'll assign its damage first. If the other creature is destroyed by this damage, it never gets to assign its damage back to the first-striker.)

✓ **Arabian Nights:** The first *Magic* expansion, this set is based on the tales of Shahrazad, the storyteller in the famed *Book of One Thousand and One Nights*. The set includes numerous djinns (better known as *genies*) and efreet, which sport devastating stats for their costs but come with

a harsh drawback of some kind, and **Ali from Cairo**, who keeps you from going below 1 life while he is in play. *Arabian Nights* also features the first lands to have other effects besides producing mana.

- ✔ **Antiquities:** This set's theme is artifacts; nearly every card in the expansion is an artifact or mentions artifacts somewhere in its text. Notable cards include **Candelabra of Tawnos**, an artifact card that lets you untap multiple lands at once, and **Mishra's Workshop**, a land card that taps for three mana that can be used only to play artifacts. The *Revised Edition* of the base set hit soon after, stripping out some of *Unlimited Edition's* most broken and confusing cards and replacing them with reprints of cards from the first two expansions.
- ✔ **Legends:** The largest expansion at the time it was published, this set boasts a whopping 310 cards based around *legendary* creatures, of which only one copy of a single name can be in play at a given time. All such creatures were also the game's first *multicolored* cards, which had gold borders and required mana of more than one specific color to be paid. Nowadays, the set is better known for **Mana Drain**, an instant card that counters a spell and then gives you the mana spent on it for your next turn.
- ✔ **The Dark:** This set's focus is on creatures of the night, like **The Fallen**, a zombie-like monster that directly damages opponents every turn, and **Elves of Deep Shadow**, green 1/1 creatures that can be tapped to give you an extra black mana, but at the cost of dealing one damage to you.
- ✔ **Fallen Empires:** Overall, this is a fairly weak set, but it has some gems, like **Hymn to Tourach**, which picks off two random cards from your opponent's hand — destroying them for in-play — for just two black mana, and **Order of the Ebon Hand**, a 2/1 for two black mana that can gain first strike or pump up its power at will. (*Fallen Empires* had a larger-than-normal print run, and the abundance of the cards led to the set being devalued in the eyes of not just collectors, but players as well.)
- ✔ **Ice Age Block:** The first set in the *block format*, which includes multiple sets under a similar theme, *Ice Age* was also the first set since *Alpha* that was designed to be played on its own. The next set, *Homelands*, is pretty weak and wasn't really developed with the snow world focus of *Ice Age*. But the following one, *Alliances*, did a better job of playing off some of *Ice Age's* mechanics. Together they formed the *Ice Age Block*, which can be played as its own format. Hot cards in the block include **Necropotence**, a black enchantment card that allows you to spend life to draw cards, and **Force of Will**, a free counterspell. The block also introduced *cumulative upkeep*, a way to make spells cheaper when first played but more expensive to maintain later on.

The *Fourth Edition* of the base set also came out around this time, reprinting cards up through *The Dark*.

✓ **Mirage Block:** This block is made up of *Mirage*, *Visions*, and *Weatherlight*. The first two sets focus on an African theme while the third begins the Weatherlight Saga, an ongoing storyline that extends through many expansions over the next few years. New mechanics include *flanking*, which makes creatures more powerful when blocked, and *phasing*, which makes creatures cheaper at the cost of having them only be in play every other turn. Hot cards include *Mirage's* **Hammer of Bogardan**, a sorcery card that deals three damage directly to any target and also returns itself from your graveyard to your hand each turn, and *Visions' Vampiric Tutor*, an instant card that lets you search out any card from your deck at the cost of just one black mana and two life points.

The *Fifth Edition* was released during this period as well, with a huge card base of more than 400 cards.

✓ **Tempest Block (a.k.a. Rath cycle):** Comprising *Tempest*, *Stronghold*, and *Exodus*, the block brings *buyback*, one of the most powerful mechanics ever created, to the game; buyback allows you to pay an extra cost when playing a spell in order to have it return to your hand for reuse. *Shadow*, a way to make creatures harder to block, is also a featured mechanic. Notable cards include *Tempest's* **Cursed Scroll**, a one-mana artifact card that can repeatedly nail any target for two damage a turn, and *Stronghold's* **Sliver Queen**, the game's first five-color creature.

✓ **Urza Block:** Made up of *Urza's Saga*, *Urza's Legacy*, and *Urza's Destiny*, this block has a load of artifact cards as well as some of the most powerful cards ever printed to date. **Tolarian Academy**, a land that taps for one blue mana for each artifact its controller has, soon dominated tournaments and had to be banned, as did several other cards from the block. These overpowered cards led to further improvements in *Magic's* development processes and led to fewer banishments later on. The block also introduces *cycling*, which lets you pitch a card for two mana and draw another card, and *echo*, which makes some permanents cheaper but requires their mana costs to be paid twice.

Sixth Edition was released during this block, too, bringing a number of sweeping changes to the *Magic* rules in order to clean up a lot of confusing issues that had cropped up over the years.

✓ **Masques Block:** Featuring *Mercadian Masques*, *Nemesis*, and *Prophecy*, the central mechanic here involves the rebel and mercenary factions, who can recruit other creatures of their type from the library directly into play. Spellshapers, who let you pay a mana cost and discard a card to produce an effect, also figure prominently here. (One notable Spellshaper was **Waterfront Bouncer**, who could return a creature to

a player's hand if you spent a colorless mana and a blue mana and discarded a card for his ability.)

- ✓ **Invasion Block:** Regarded by many as one of the most popular blocks to date, the *Invasion*, *Planeshift*, and *Apocalypse* sets took the idea of multi-colored cards to a whole new level, with about half the block being gold cards and many others featuring cross-breeds that had mana costs of one color but activation costs of another. A favorite of the *Invasion Block* crowd was *Apocalypse's* **Vindicate**, a sorcery card that destroyed any permanent for just one colorless, one white, and one black mana.) A neat subset here is the *split cards*, which can be played as either of two spells of different colors. The block also includes *kicker*, which lets you pay extra mana for an extra effect when playing a spell, and *domain*, which lets spells get more powerful if you have several different basic land types in play.

The *Seventh Edition* also made an appearance at the tail end of this block.

- ✓ **Odyssey Block:** *Odyssey*, *Torment*, and *Judgment's* main focus is on the graveyard. *Flashback* allows you to play spells a second time from the graveyard, while *threshold* cards get more powerful if you have seven or more cards in your graveyard. Also, *madness* spells can be played while they are being discarded from your hand. A famous creature here is *Odyssey's* **Psychatog**, a 1/2 for three mana that can grow to monstrous proportions simply by discarding cards or removing them from the game. Also, *Torment* is notable for having many more black cards and fewer green and white cards than the other colors, while *Judgment* balances this out in the opposite direction.
- ✓ **Onslaught Block:** The main theme of *Onslaught*, *Legions*, and *Scourge* is that of the "tribes," *Magic's* creature types. Goblins, elves, wizards, soldiers, and zombies are some of the most prominent. The block also brings back cycling with some new twists, as well as the funky *morph* mechanic, which lets you play any creature with the ability face-down as a 2/2, where it can later be flipped face-up. The block's most powerful creature was **Exalted Angel**, who cost six mana for a 4/5 flyer that gained you life when she dealt damage and who could also be played as a morph face-down and then turned face-up for just four mana. *Legions* is notable for being the only set composed entirely of creatures, while *Scourge* brings a bunch of dragon-related cards to the game and also introduces *storm*, a mechanic that copies a spell each time another spell is played in a given turn.

Eighth Edition came out after this block, boasting an updated, more easily readable card face noticeably different from that of previous sets.



Cards in *Eighth Edition* went through the greatest changes in their layout, but there have been other changes over the years that might confuse new players who pick up copies of old cards. These changes include things like a change in the tap symbol (it used to be an off-kilter *T*) and the use of terms like both *Interrupt* and *Instant*. (Without going into too much detail, the interrupt and instant mechanics were combined into the current instant mechanic.) If you pick up any of these old cards and are confused over the symbols or terms, check the Web sites listed at the end of this chapter for explanations or head to your Friendly Local Game Store for help.

- ✓ **Mirrodin Block:** *Mirrodin*, *Darksteel*, and *Fifth Dawn* make up this artifact-based block, with about half the block's cards being artifacts and many more playing off of them. Many new mechanics debut here, including *affinity*, which makes cards cheaper for each artifact you control; *equipment*, artifacts that work like auras but stick around after an equipped creature is destroyed; and *sunburst*, which strengthens artifacts if you pay several different colors of mana to play them. The block's most powerful equipment was **Skulleclamp**, which gave a creature +1/-1 and drew you two cards when the creature was put into a graveyard.
- ✓ **Kamigawa Block:** *Champions of Kamigawa*, *Betrayers of Kamigawa*, and *Saviors of Kamigawa* make up this Japanese-themed block, complete with ninjas and samurai! Spirits and dragons abound here, as do a special type of spirit magic known as *arcane*. Legends return here in a big way, and *flip cards*, which turn from one form into another when a certain goal has been achieved, debut here too. One neat flip card was *Saviors' Erayo, Soratami Ascendant*. He started out as a 1/1 flyer, but flipped into an Enchantment card called **Erayo's Essence** after four spells were played in a given turn; **Erayo's Essence** then countered the first spell an opponent played each turn after that.

Ninth Edition, the current base set, was released after this block.

- ✓ **Ravnica Block:** Like *Invasion Block*, this newest block focuses on multi-color cards but breaks them down into 10 two-color guilds. The first set, *Ravnica*, contains the Boros (red/white), Dimir (blue/black), Golgari (black/green), and Selesnya (green/white) guilds, each with its own signature mechanics. *Guildpact* and *Dissension* are scheduled to release in 2006, with the former containing the Gruul Clans (red/green), Izzet (blue/red), and Orzhov Syndicate (white/black), and the latter having the Azorius Senate (white/blue), Cult of Rakdos (black/red), and Simic Combine (green/blue). The Boros got a very strong instant in *Ravnica* with **Lightning Helix**, which dealt 3 damage to any target and gained you 3 life for a cost of just one red mana and one white mana.

Also, an update set for the old *Ice Age Block*, called *Coldsnap*, will release in the summer of 2006 and will feature many of that block's themes.

Additionally, a number of independent sets have been released over the years. The humor sets *Unglued* and *Unhinged* brought players a whole slew of fun and goofy cards that feature jokes that had cropped up among the *Magic* crowd. *Portal*, *Portal: Second Age*, and the Asian-themed *Portal: Three Kingdoms* were designed for beginners. Also, numerous boxed gift sets containing special decks are made available each year, as are a series of world champion decks.

Building a Strong Basic Deck

The previous sections show you how the game works and give you a look at the vast number of cards that *Magic* has to offer. When you have all of that under your belt, it's time to build a deck. To construct a deck, you must use at least 60 cards, with no more than four of any specific card besides basic lands. To make it easy for you to track down the cards I use here — assuming, of course, that you actually want to build this particular deck for yourself — I stick with *Ninth Edition* common and uncommon cards.

Your creature base looks like this:

- ✓ 4 copies of **Llanowar Elves**
- ✓ 4 copies of **Kird Ape**
- ✓ 4 copies of **Grizzly Bears**
- ✓ 4 copies of **Goblin Brigand**
- ✓ 4 copies of **Viashino Sandstalker**
- ✓ 2 copies of **Hunted Wumpus**

This deck follows a common principle used in *Magic* deck construction — the mana curve. This means that in order to be able to use as much of your mana as possible each turn, you want to play with a greater number of cheap creatures and spells than more expensive ones.

Two creatures here fall into the one-drop slot. **Llanowar Elves** are 1/1s for a single green mana who can tap for a green mana, letting you play more expensive stuff more quickly than you'd normally be able to. **Kird Ape** is also a 1/1, but it costs a red mana. His big bonus comes if you control a forest — an easy task in this deck — where he becomes a 2/3 and can rule the board in the early game.

The two-drops are the **Goblin Brigand**, who I'm sure you've come to love by now, and **Grizzly Bears**, a vanilla 2/2 for one green mana and one other. At the three-slot are three copies of **Viashino Sandstalker**, a 4/2 lizard-like creature for two red mana and one other. (You can have a gander at him in Figure 4-7.) **Viashino Sandstalker** has haste, which lets him attack during the turn he hits play instead of waiting a turn, but in return, he pops himself back to your hand at the end of each turn.



Figure 4-7: **Viashino Sandstalker's** haste ability lets him attack during the turn he's played.

The last creature is the **Hunted Wumpus**, a huge 6/6 beast for just one green mana and three others. This is a really cheap cost for such a large body, but it comes with a drawback; your opponent gets to put a creature from his or her hand into play when you play the **Hunted Wumpus**. Usually, though, it'll be smaller than the **Wumpus**, and life will be good (at least for your hand!).

On the spell side of the deck, you have these cards:

- ✓ 4 copies of **Shock**
- ✓ 4 copies of **Volcanic Hammer**
- ✓ 4 copies of **Giant Growth**
- ✓ 2 copies of **Blaze**

If you read the previous sections, you've become well acquainted with **Giant Growth** by now, so I talk a bit about the other spells. **Shock**, **Volcanic Hammer**, and **Blaze** are all known as *direct-damage spells*; they can deal damage directly to a creature or player without requiring you to attack with creatures. They're just as good at removing pesky attackers or blockers as they are at lowering your opponent's life total.

Shock's an instant card that deals two damage at a cost of just a single red mana, and the **Hammer** is a sorcery card that hits for three damage for one red mana and one other. **Blaze**, seen in Figure 4-8, is a special kind of spell commonly called an *X-spell*. The *X* in its mana cost means that you can choose any number when playing it and then pay that much mana plus one red in order to deal that much damage to any target. It's a great way to take out huge creatures or to finish off your opponent at the end of a game.

In addition to the spells, you need these basic lands to power them:

- ✓ 11 copies of **Forest**
- ✓ 13 copies of **Mountain**

You have just a couple more **Mountains** here because you have more red cards than green in the deck, and only the **Viashino Sandstalkers** require more than one mana of a particular color.



Figure 4-8:
As the **Blaze**
card says,
fire never
dies alone.

Generally, you want to stick to these proportions of creatures, lands, and spells when building any new deck. This ensures that you have enough mana to play your spells and also maintains a balance between on-board threats and surprise cards.

The most common decks contain cards of only two colors because limiting yourself like this diversifies the different abilities you can use more than a single-color deck does but enables you to draw the right color mana more often than a multicolored deck does. It's often tempting to try and squeeze in as many cool new cards as possible when building a deck, but you're better off putting them into separate decks; sticking to the 60-card minimum gives you the greatest possible chance of drawing a given card at a given time.

Adding Combos for Power and Protection

As you get more experienced at building decks, you'll be able to stray from the previous guidelines more often and can also incorporate more rare and complex cards into your deck. Besides *Ninth Edition*, cards from the *Kamigawa* and *Ravnica* blocks are a good place to start because they're readily available. Also, along with *Ninth Edition*, these two sets make up the popular Standard tournament format. This will make it easier to find a game at your local store.

For the deck I outline in the preceding section, *Ninth Edition* sports some cool rares that can enhance it, such as **Karplusan Forest**, a "painland" that can either tap for a colorless mana with no drawback or tap for either a red or a green mana and deal one damage to you. Another cool rare here is the red enchantment card **Furnace of Rath**, which doubles the damage that creatures and spells deal. **Rathi Dragon** is a huge 5/5 flyer for just four mana, but it requires you to sacrifice two **Mountains** when you play it, and **Relentless Assault** is a four-mana sorcery card that untaps your creatures and gives you an extra attack each turn.

On the green side, the gigantic 8/8 **Force of Nature** costs you just six mana and has *trample*, a powerful ability that lets some of its combat damage spill over onto your opponent when it's blocked. However, in return for its comparatively cheap cost, you have to pay four green mana each upkeep to maintain it. Also, **Might of Oaks** is an instant card that gives a creature an enormous +7/+7 bonus for just a green mana and three other mana.

Kamigawa and *Ravnica* allow for a host of other cards to be included, and with *Ravnica*'s gold theme, it allows you to branch out more easily into decks with three or more colors. *Ravnica* has plenty of cards that allow you to smooth out your mana base and to play the spells you want to when you need to play them.

If you plan on playing in tournaments, you'll want to construct a *sideboard* for your deck. You use this 15-card side deck to switch cards between it and your main deck between games of a tournament match. Most matches run in a best-of-three format, so you'll be using your sideboard a lot. Common strategies for building a sideboard include using cards that hurt a specific color; **Flashfires** is one such sorcery card that destroys all **Plains** in play. You might also want to pack cards that deal with certain weaknesses in the main deck. For example, **Viridian Shaman** is a 2/2 creature that destroys an opponent's artifact card when it comes into play, something that nothing in the previous main deck can do. The number of different strategies and builds you can play with is literally endless!

For something completely different, a fun alternative to constructed deck play is called a *booster draft*. An even number of players — four, six, or eight works best — sit in a circle, each with three unopened booster packs. Each player opens his or her first pack, picks a card from it, and then passes it to the left. You take a card from the pack that was just passed to you and then pass it again and repeat until all the cards have been taken. With the second booster, you repeat this process, passing to the right instead, and then back to the left with the third pack. From the 45 cards you've taken, you'll take about half and add roughly 16 to 18 basic land cards to make a 40-card minimum deck — a special minimum used only for booster draft games — and then play as you would any other game of *Magic*!

Resources for Expanding Your Skills

Magic's timing was pretty lucky. Back in 1993, the Internet was just starting to catch on across the world, especially on college campuses, where many players lived. The growth of strategy and information networks about the game paralleled the growth of the online community as a whole, with newsgroups and Web sites devoted to the game springing up over the years. Here's a look at a few of the best *Magic* resources:

- ✔ **MagicTheGathering.com:** Located at www.magicthegathering.com, Wizards of the Coast's official *Magic* Web site has loads of strategy and general-interest columns as well as tournament coverage, the complete *Magic* rules, and loads of other game info.
- ✔ **Magic Online:** If you don't have a nearby game store or just have a hankering for a game at 3:00 in the morning, you can hop onto Magic Online and get in a match with anyone across the world. You can download a copy — which is only available for PCs right now — from www.magicthegathering.com.

- ✔ **Star City Games and Brainburst:** Located at www.starcitygames.com and www.brainburst.com, these sites have a large number of feature writers, including many who've won a load of money on *Magic's* pro tours. You can also find a huge number of single cards for sale at these two sites, as well as deck lists and card search functions.
- ✔ **InQuest Gamer and Scrye magazines:** The two largest and best-known trading card game magazines have loads of *Magic* strategy and deck-building articles. *InQuest Gamer* has a humorous and irreverent tone to many of its articles, while *Scrye* toes a more conservative line, so you should be able to figure out which suits your tastes better. Each one also has an extensive price guide and news on the trading card game market. InQuest Gamer also has more strategy tips and news at www.wizarduniverse.com/inquest.
- ✔ **Magic Rarities:** Located at www.magiclibrary.net/rarities.html, this site sports information on rare and unique *Magic* cards, as well as information on authorized, unauthorized, and semi-authorized sets produced by fans.

Chapter 5

Battling for Superhero Supremacy with the Vs. System

In This Chapter

- ▶ Comic relief: From graphic novels to gameplay
 - ▶ An X-ray view at Vs. cards
 - ▶ Bringing POW! BANG! BOOM! to life
 - ▶ From *Origins* to *Avengers*: A look at the Vs. sets
 - ▶ Forming your first team
 - ▶ Powering up your favorite heroes
-

Ever wanted to run faster than a speeding bullet and leap tall buildings in a single bound? Fancy yourself as a do-gooder who's bound to save the world, or the supervillain bent on destroying it? Don't break out that shiny spandex get-up quite yet — you won't *actually* be doing any of that high-flyin' stuff for real. But what you *will* do with the *Vs. System* is take all of that superhero action and bring it to your dining room table in an exciting new way.

Upper Deck's trading card game, currently made up of the Marvel and DC comic universes, encompasses the characters, locations, battles, and superpowers that have shown up in those worlds over their many years. Want to pit Spider-Man against The Joker? Wolverine vs. Lex Luthor? Or even team up Doctor Doom and Daredevil to take on all comers? It's all possible in *Vs.*

The game's been around for just two years, but it already has eight sets and more than 1,000 cards — most of which are easily accessible — from which to build your teams, with new ones releasing every three months. How about a peek inside, along with some tips on making your own decks?

Bringing Comics to Cards

For any good game based on a licensed property, it's important to stay true to the feel of that property. The cards in *Vs.* do a good job of that, taking the classic characters and translating their powers into meaningful game abilities. Places like Genosha, Latveria, and Korugar bring their own flavor to the game, as do the many storylines that enrich the comic realms.

But it's really the battles between the heroes and villains that take center stage. Not only do characters slug it out in one-on-one combat, but they also can team up with each other and boost each other's abilities to take on foes. And while characters that frequently join forces get some abilities unique to those team-ups, the trading card game format lets you bring together unlikely allies — even those that cross over the Marvel/DC boundaries.

In *Vs.*, you represent a mastermind who recruits characters to fight against your opponent's forces. Each player starts out with 50 *endurance points*, which symbolize how strong you and your team are. Each turn, you build up more and more resources to help you bring more powerful fighters and gear to the table. Meanwhile, you'll be able to activate the powers of Location cards under your control and play ingenious Plot Twist cards to throw a wrench into your opponent's plans. By attacking the characters your opponent has recruited — and later on attacking him or her directly — you can whittle away at your adversary's endurance points. The first person to knock an opponent's endurance down to 0 points at the end of a turn wins the game!

Reading the Cards

Vs. has four main card types — the standard Characters, Equipment, Locations, and Plot Twists types you find in many trading card games — and each one has its own unique set of identifiers and statistics. Of these four card types, Characters are the meat and potatoes of a combat-based game such as this one, so I start with those.

Characters: The heart and soul of Vs.

At the top of a Character card are a *name* and a *version*. The name tells you who appears on the card and also determines the *uniqueness* of that character — normally, only one character of a given name can be in play at a given time.



Some characters have a diamond symbol and an *identity* after the name; this denotes characters who have been more than one individual in their persona at different times, such as Green Lantern and Spider-Woman. No matter how many different identities a character might have, though, you're still only allowed to have the one character in play at a given time.

The version gives you a more specific read into the personality of the character; *Orooro Munroe* is **Storm's** version in Figure 5-1, but she has other versions as well, including *Weather Witch*. Some cards have the version *army*; these are interchangeable grunts and are not unique.



Figure 5-1: Storm is a key member of the X-Men, and she's pretty good in Vs., too.

On the top-left corner of a Character card is a number displaying that card's *recruit cost*. The higher this number, the more expensive it is to bring out and the more powerful it generally is. Storm has a cost of 4, so she's somewhere in the middle of the pack. Below the recruit cost is a character's *team affiliation* — *X-Men* in Storm's case — which plays a part when she's got other X-Men on her side or when other cards key off of having X-Men somewhere in a given game. Some character cards don't have a team, but most do.



Team affiliation in the *Vs. System* is key to many successful strategies, but there are also cards that can effectively shut down a whole team during play. Be careful when building decks that you do not fall prey to this counter tactic.

Some lucky characters have the benefit of *flight* and/or *range*. The winged icon symbolizes flight; crosshairs denote range. I get to those soon in more depth, but in a nutshell, they allow the character to attack more characters than he or she would otherwise be able to. Storm's got some major talent here — she's got both!

On the bottom-left corner of any Character card, you see two stats: *attack* (ATK) on top and *defense* (DEF) on the bottom. The ATK — 7 for Storm — shows how powerful the character is in combat; the higher the number, the more damage he or she will be able to inflict. The DEF — 6 in Storm's case — shows how much force a character can absorb before getting stunned; again, the higher the number, the stronger that character is.



At the bottom of the card are three letters followed by three numbers; these are the expansion code and set number of the card. They appear on every card in the game and show what *Vs.* set they came from. Rare cards have gold lettering, uncommons go for a silver look, and common cards stick with white. This text has no effect on gameplay.

Finally, below the illustration of your hero or supervillain, you find the card's text box — probably the part of the card you'll be most interested in. Most cards have special abilities that appear here — Storm, for example, allows you to pay two of your endurance points to remove flight from opposing characters for a turn. (Being able to pay for certain perks is called — drumroll, please — a *payment power*.) Many different keywords can appear here as well; they denote abilities that are common among many different characters and have specific definitions within the game.



Rather than the red background seen on most Characters, some Characters have a black background and the keywords *concealed* or *concealed — optional* in their text boxes. This means that they come into play in a player's hidden zone (for *concealed*) or give you the choice of whether to have them come into play as either visible or hidden (for *concealed — optional*). I discuss zones in a bit, but all this means is that a character who is hidden *can't* be attacked by opposing characters but *can* attack normally. Generally, characters can't change from hidden to visible or vice versa unless they have an ability or are affected by a card that lets them do that.

Equipment: The gear that shifts games

Equipment cards have a gray background and are the vehicles, weapons, and other accessories that boost characters: They can make characters stronger, give characters more targets to attack, or grant other abilities that characters don't otherwise have. Equipment is played on a character that's in play already, and most characters can have only one piece of equipment on them at a time.

Escrima Sticks, shown in Figure 5-2, has a recruit cost of 1 in its top-left corner, just like a Character card has, and the word *Equipment* down the left side to remind you of the card's type. Its text gives +1 to both ATK and DEF for the character to which it's attached. The *transferable* keyword means that once a turn at a specified time, you have the option to move your **Escrima Sticks** to another character under your control.

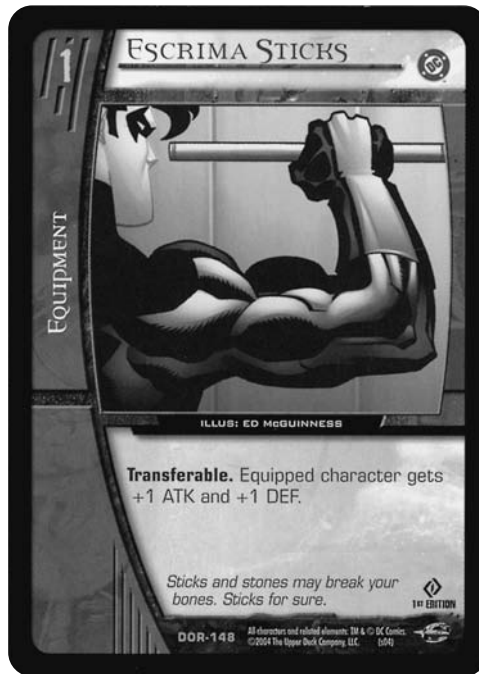


Figure 5-2:
Escrima Sticks
pumps up your characters and can move to where it's needed most.

Locations: Home-field advantage

Third on the list of card types is Locations, which can be anything from the home bases of heroes and villains to famous buildings where they congregate to other significant places in the comic universe. Locations are denoted by a green background and often give a benefit to members of a specific team or subset of characters. Like characters, they're also unique, so you can have only one of a given name in play at a time.

Mojoverse, the Location card shown in Figure 5-3, has a *threshold cost* of 1 in its upper-left corner and a reminder-type line on the left side. I touch on the play differences between threshold and recruit costs in a bit, but ultimately the higher the cost, the stronger the location's powers. **Mojoverse** grants a continuous bonus to any attackers in play that have no team affiliation, plus you can activate it — turn it sideways from its normal *ready* position — to remove all team affiliations from any of your characters.



In addition to activating Locations, you can also activate many Characters for their abilities. Besides being ready or exhausted, Character cards have an additional position — *stunned*. Stunned characters have been temporarily defeated in battle — but not knocked out — and are turned face-down to show this. Stunned characters remain exhausted until they are readied.



Figure 5-3:
Mojoverse
gives
unaffiliated
characters
something to
cheer about.

Plot Twists: Retelling the story

The last card type — Plot Twist — signifies a change in the game's storyline. Plot Twist cards have a blue background and are generally played as a surprise maneuver to affect combat or to grant other abilities or effects.

Like Location cards, Plot Twist cards have a threshold cost and a reminder-type line. Their text boxes explain what to do when you play them. The Plot Twists themselves are usually just one-shot effects, but some, like **Blood in the Dark** (see Figure 5-4), have additional ongoing effects and show the keyword *ongoing*. Such ongoing effects are denoted by a clock icon on the left side and take effect only if the Plot Twist remains in play after you've played it.



Figure 5-4:
Blood in the Dark showcases the stealth that made Batman famous.

Blood in the Dark's first effect allows one of your characters to attack a hidden character, while its ongoing effect allows you to pay two endurance points to give that ability to all of your characters. That Batman's a wily one!

Trying a Sample Game

After you've gotten a handle on what everything looks like and does, it's time to show the steps of a typical turn. But first, I need to go over the board setup. The game's made up of the following six *zones*:

- ✔ **Deck:** This is the stack of cards from which you draw all of your cards. Each player has one, and no one may look through it unless a card specifically allows them to.
- ✔ **Hand:** This is where you hold the cards you've drawn. Only you can see these cards unless a card lets another player look.
- ✔ **KO'd Pile:** Each player has a pile in which he places characters that are *knocked out* in combat, along with any other discarded cards.
- ✔ **Chain:** This is where both players place cards from their hands before the cards come into play or take effect. Players can add new cards and abilities on top of the chain whenever cards allow them to, with the top card resolving as soon as no one adds to it.
- ✔ **Removed from Game:** Surprise! You put cards that are removed from the game here. Remember to return these — along with any cards that change controllers — to their original owners at the end of the game.
- ✔ **In-Play:** All the action takes place here. Hidden characters go on the left and visible characters go on the right, with an empty column between the two areas.

The visible area comprises these three rows:

- ✔ **Front row:** Your main fighters go here. Only front-row characters and characters with range may attack.
- ✔ **Support row:** Your defensive and specialty characters generally go here because they're less vulnerable here to being attacked right away. If a support-row character has a *non-stunned* character in front of it, it's considered to be *protected* and can't be attacked except by characters with flight. Characters with range are often better off here because they can still attack. (Don't worry too much about this *non-stunned* business — I get to that shortly, but it basically means that the character is ready to defend you from all comers.)
- ✔ **Resource row:** You play cards face-down here to power your other cards. Location and Plot Twist cards can be flipped face-up from here if you have at least as many resources as their threshold costs, so you generally want to play them (rather than Character cards) here.

The hidden area is arranged in the same way as the visible area, except it has no Resource row.



If you've played other trading card games before, you've probably rotated turns between players. In *Vs.*, though, players share a turn, with both players completing each phase of the turn before proceeding to the next one. The person who goes first in each phase of a given turn has the initiative, which is determined randomly at the start of the game and passes back and forth at the end of each turn.

Now that you understand the game layout, you can start the turn. After you shuffle your deck, draw four cards. If you don't like them — maybe you've drawn all expensive characters, or no characters at all — you can *mulligan* once per game by placing those four cards on the bottom of your deck and drawing four new ones.

Building up your forces

At the start of each turn, both players draw two cards; this is in addition to the four that you drew to open the game. After this comes the *Build phase*, which is made up of the following three steps:

- ✓ **Resource step:** First, you play a card from your hand face-down into your Resource row. The more resources you have in play, the more powerful cards you'll be able to throw down.
- ✓ **Recruit step:** Next, you can recruit characters and equipment into either your Front or Support row. Each resource provides one *resource point* that you'll be able to spend each turn to play characters and equipment. For example, if you have three resources in play, you can play a character with a recruit cost of 3. You could also play a character with a recruit cost of 2 and another with a cost of 1.
- ✓ **Formation step:** Now you can rearrange your characters as you see fit, based on the rules for attacking to and from the different rows.

Duking it out

Now for the fun part — character combat! After you're done with the Build phase, the *Combat phase* begins. Both players can first play Plot Twist cards or fire up the powers of Location cards, and the player with the initiative chooses one of his or her ready characters to become an attacker and exhausts it. Then, that same player chooses an opposing character to attack; you can attack only characters that are face-up (not stunned).

Each player may now play additional Plot Twist cards and call up more powers from Location cards as part of resolving the attack. Remember those attack and defense stats we talked about? Here's where they come into play. If the attacker's ATK is greater than or equal to the defender's DEF, the defender becomes stunned. If the defender's ATK is greater than or equal to the attacker's DEF, the attacker becomes stunned. Exhaust those characters if they're not already exhausted and then turn them face-down.



If you've got an extra copy of a character in your hand, you don't have to just let it sit there. During the attack, you may discard any extras to give a +1 bonus to the matching character's ATK and DEF for each card discarded. This is called *powering up* that character.

When a character becomes stunned, its controller takes a *stun endurance loss* equal to that stunned character's recruit cost. Also, if the attacker's ATK is greater than the defender's DEF, the defender takes a *breakthrough endurance loss* equal to the difference; this doesn't apply to the attacker if by chance he or she loses. A defender can prevent a breakthrough endurance loss by exhausting a ready Support-row character of the same team affiliation that's *adjacent* — directly behind or next to it — to *reinforce* the defender.

After you're done with the first attack, you may repeat this step until you have no more ready characters or just choose to stop.



If a defender is too big for one character to defeat alone, you can *team-attack* that character by declaring two or more characters of the same team affiliation as attackers simultaneously. You add up their ATKs and compare them to the defender's DEF to see whether he or she gets stunned; the opponent compares the defender's ATK to just one attacker's DEF. Unlike regular attacks, team attacks never cause breakthrough endurance loss.

Marvel vs. DC

If you're a fan of the Marvel and DC universes, you'll love the fact that you can play *Vs.* with all of the major characters — and many of the minor ones, too! If you're new to the comic scene, *Vs.* paints a great picture of how rich the comic worlds are. Speaking of painting pictures, the artwork on the cards is created mainly by famous Marvel and DC artists, from Adam Kubert's cool **Iceman** to Ariel Olivetti's demonic **Ra's al Ghul** to the incomparable Alex Ross's **Aquaman**.

Wanna pit the two universes against each other? Easy enough — with more than 30 different teams available, you can play your DC *Teen Titans* deck against your Marvel-fan friend's *Masters of Evil*, or your *Arkham Inmates* against his or her *Spider-Friends*. Of course, the compatibility of each set allows you to team up unlikely candidates; good guys can pair up with evil, and Marvel and DC teams can work just fine together, too!

If your opponent has no unstunned characters left in play, you may directly attack him or her. The attacker simply deals endurance loss to that player equal to its ATK; this is considered a breakthrough.

Healing up your team

Now that you're done with combat, you've got a few more important things to take care of in the *Recovery phase*:

- ✔ If a player is at 0 or less endurance, the other player wins the game. If both players are at 0 or less, the one with the higher endurance total wins.
- ✔ If both players are still above 0 endurance, each player may recover a stunned character by turning it's card face-up, leaving it exhausted. All other stunned characters are put into their owner's KO'd pile. Then, both players ready all exhausted characters and locations for use on the next turn.
- ✔ Now, change initiative to the other player and begin the next turn!

Games generally take at least six or seven turns before one player wins, though some slower decks that rely more on controlling the action than on rapid attacks can make a game last a lot longer. Expect an average game to take about 15 to 20 minutes after you have a feel for how the game flows. If it seems like things are going slowly at the beginning of a particular game, don't worry — cards get exponentially better at each cost increase, so the big guns usually end the game quickly when they hit the table.

Strolling through the Stacks

With eight sets having been released to date, there's an awful lot to sift through. Each of the sets not only introduces new characters and teams, but each also sports new mechanics and abilities that add to the game. Here are the nuts and bolts of each of the expansions so far:

- ✔ **Marvel Origins:** The first Vs. set, *Origins* hit stores in the spring of 2004. It featured five main teams: *X-Men*, *Brotherhood*, *Doom*, *Fantastic Four*, and *Sentinels*, with a few from the *Negative Zone* and *Skrull* teams. Famous characters include **Wolverine**, **Sabretooth**, and **Dr. Doom**.
- ✔ **DC Origins:** Debuting a few months after Marvel, this set contained Batman's *Gotham Knights*, Robin's *Teen Titans*, The Joker's *Arkham Inmates*, and Ra's al Ghul's *League of Assassins*. It also marked the first cards with *boost*, which lets you pay a card's optional extra cost to

make it more powerful, and *loyalty*, which are cards that are cheaper than normal but can be recruited only if you control a character on the same team as that card.

- ✓ **Marvel Web of Spider-Man:** The *Spider-Friends* and *Sinister Syndicate* first showed up here, as did a few characters from the *Origins* teams. Notable in the set were **Spider-Man**, **Dr. Octopus**, and **Green Goblin**, as was the inclusion of *evasion*, which allows a character to avoid being attacked by stunning itself for a turn.
- ✓ **DC Superman, Man of Steel:** Besides *Team Superman*, Orion's *New Gods*, Lex Luthor's *Revenge Squad*, and Darkseid's *Elite* debuted here. *Cosmic*, a temporary way of granting a strong bonus to a card, and *invulnerability*, which gives characters the ability to ignore stun endurance loss, first popped up here as well.
- ✓ **Marvel Knights:** This set featured the new teams of *Marvel Knights*, *X-Statix*, *Crime Lords*, and *Underworld*, with key characters including **Daredevil**, **Elektra**, **Punisher**, **Kingpin**, and **Mephisto**. This was the first set to include concealed characters and also contained the first characters with *loyalty* to two teams.
- ✓ **DC Green Lantern Corps:** In addition to the *Green Lantern Corps* itself, teams here were *Emerald Enemies*, *Anti-Matter*, and *Manhunter*. The first concealed — optional characters showed up, too, and the *willpower* and *construct* keywords also debuted. The last two did nothing on their own, but the set had many cards that keyed off cards that contained one of these keywords in their text boxes. Many flavors of **Lanterns** showed up, as did Lantern-gone-bad **Sinestro**.
- ✓ **Marvel The Avengers:** *Squadron Supreme*, *Thunderbolts*, *Masters of Evil*, and *Kang Council* joined *The Avengers* in this expansion. **Captain America** and **Iron Man** were key here, but the 11 nonunique versions of **Kang** caught many players' eyes. The set also showcased *leaders*, who gave bonuses to adjacent characters, and *reservists*, who could be recruited from the Resource row, as well as the *team-up* keyword for characters.
- ✓ **DC Justice League of America:** Besides the *JLA*, the *Justice League International*, *Injustice Gang*, and *Secret Society* started here, bringing **Wonder Woman**, **Captain Marvel**, and many new dual-team versions of older characters with them. It also featured *allies*, who gained powers when other friendly characters powered up.



For a look at some of the great artwork for these cards, check out the galleries in those sections of Upper Deck Entertainment's Web site devoted to DC's *Vs. System* (www.upperdeckentertainment.com/dc/en/) and Marvel's *Vs. System* (www.upperdeckentertainment.com/marvel/en/).

Building a Basic Deck

Now that you've got the rules down, how about putting together a deck? With more than 1,000 different cards out there, you have quite a bit to choose from. To keep things from becoming too intimidating, I limit the card pool to cards from the latest Marvel expansion, *The Avengers*. I leave out the rare cards for now, too; that should make it easy to find these cards if you want to build this deck for yourself.

For most decks, it's a good idea to follow some basic guidelines:

- ✔ Character cards should take up about 30 to 40 of the 60 cards in the deck. While 60 is the minimum number of cards for a constructed deck, it's a good idea to stick to that number in order to maximize your chances of drawing a specific card when you need it. Remember, too, that you can have up to only four copies of any card in your deck.
- ✔ The rest of your deck — about 20 to 30 cards — should be made up of Plot Twist and Location cards with only very efficient equipment. Reservist characters can replace some of these as well because you'll be able to replace them with a card from your hand when you recruit them from your Resource row.
- ✔ Try shooting for a larger number of cheaper cards rather than more expensive ones. The exact counts will vary depending on the teams you go with, but generally, you want a few 0- to 1-cost cards, with most of the rest of your deck falling into the 2-to-4-cost range. Anything more expensive than that should be kept to no more than a few cards.

To make things easy to grasp, I show you how to build a deck from a single team here, *The Avengers*. (Many decks run two teams along with Plot Twists that allow them to count as the same team; few run more than two teams.) This team has some great interactions among its members. Additionally, many of them are reservists, so you can be sure that you can play your characters when you need to.

The cheaper end of your character base looks something like this:

- ✔ 3 copies of **Hank Pym <> Ant-Man, Diminutive Hero**
- ✔ 4 copies of **Rick Jones, A Hero's Best Friend**
- ✔ 4 copies of **Dane Whitman <> Black Knight, Heroic Paladin**
- ✔ 4 copies of **Falcon, Sam Wilson**
- ✔ 2 copies of **Wasp, Janet Van Dyne-Pym**

At the one-cost slot, **Ant-Man** and **Rick** come out very quickly on your first turn; Hank can come in concealed, but he gets up to 4 ATK while visible and team-attacking. **Rick**'s even trickier — not only can he come in concealed or as a reservist, but he can also be played for free if you discard an Avengers character card. This isn't too big a cost because you're drawing two cards each turn.

Stepping up to the two-cost cards, **Black Knight** lets you pay a resource point and replace a reservist in your Resource row to give him a +3 bonus to ATK and DEF for a turn. **Wasp** has concealed — optional — and also is a leader who keeps adjacent characters from becoming stunned.

Falcon is one of your most important characters; besides being a reservist and getting a +2 ATK/+2 DEF bonus while adjacent to a leader character, he can also be played with a boost of 1 (for a total recruit cost of 3) to search your deck for a leader card and put it into your hand. This allows the deck to run just a single copy of some of the more expensive leaders to keep you from drawing too many unplayable cards at the same time early on.

You have the following midrange characters:

- ✔ 4 copies of **Black Panther, T'challa**
- ✔ 4 copies of **Captain America, Steve Rogers**
- ✔ 4 copies of **Quicksilver, Mutant Avenger**
- ✔ 2 copies of **Carol Danvers <> Warbird, Galactic Adventurer**
- ✔ 4 copies of **Hawkeye, Clinton Barton**
- ✔ 1 copy of **Iron Man, Tony Stark**

Black Panther comes in as a 4 ATK/3 DEF for 3, but gets +1 ATK/+1 DEF for each reservist you reveal when he hits play. **Captain America** is a leader who gives adjacent team attackers +1 ATK. **Quicksilver** is a reservist who readies whenever your team attackers stun a defender, while **Warbird**, seen in Figure 5-5, is also a reservist who can bounce a stunned defender with cost 5 or less to its owner's hand.

Hawkeye is a reservist as well, but it's his power that's really cool: He can activate to stun any number of characters with total cost 2 or less. This enables you to get a leg up from anywhere in the play area and also gives you a path to attack your opponent directly. Finally, **Iron Man** gives flight, range, and +1 ATK/+1 DEF to adjacent Avengers, and his *leader* keyword lets you search him out with **Falcon**.

Figure 5-5:
Warbird's
bounce
ability is
mighty
handy in
gaining an
advantage.



Now for the heavy hitters:

- ✓ 2 copies of **Scarlet Witch, Mistress of Chaos Magic**
- ✓ 1 copy of **She-Hulk, Gamma Bombshell**
- ✓ 1 copy of **Vision, Synthetic Humanoid**
- ✓ 1 copy of **Wonder Man, Simon Williams**
- ✓ 1 copy of **Hank Pym <> Goliath, Giant Genius**

Scarlet Witch is a 9 ATK/9 DEF for 5 — about par for the course — but she can also stop opposing character powers if you discard an Avenger during combat. **She-Hulk**'s a reservist who can gain invulnerability if you replace one of your reservists, while **Vision** can come in concealed and also can negate a non-ongoing Plot Twist card if you pay an endurance point while attacking or defending with it.

Even better, **Wonder Man**'s a reservist who lets you stun a character outside of combat! He lets you reveal up to five face-down resources when he hits play and then stun a character with a cost less than the total of the revealed numbers. Lastly, **Goliath** is 16 ATK/15 DEF for 7 — a pretty hefty size — but he also lets you discard him to reinforce an Avengers' defender you control.

You need the following Locations in your deck to house the Avengers:

- ✓ 3 copies of **Playroom**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Pym Laboratories**

Playroom, shown in Figure 5-6, lets you get around much of the no-breakthrough drawback of team attackers by dealing a loss of 4 endurance to your opponent whenever your team attackers stun a defender. And **Pym Laboratories** not only allows you to attack hidden characters, but it also lets you recover an Avenger by revealing resource-row reservists.

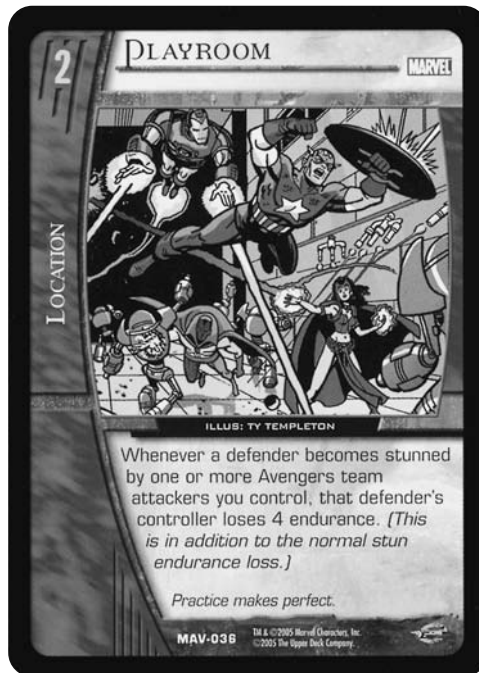


Figure 5-6: **Playroom** gives your team attackers a great extra boost.

Filling out your deck are a dozen Plot Twists:

- ✓ 4 copies of **Call Down the Lightning**
- ✓ 4 copies of **Legendary Battles**
- ✓ 4 copies of **Repulsor Ray**

As you can see in Figure 5-7, for just a threshold of 1 and replacing a reservist resource — meaning you can play it pretty much any time you attack — **Call Down the Lightning** gives one of your attackers +3 ATK/+3 DEF. **Legendary Battles** gives your team attackers +1 ATK and prevents them from being stunned. And **Repulsor Ray** gives an attacker +2 ATK and stops your opponent from using any possible payment powers listed as part of a character's special abilities.



Figure 5-7:
Wanna quickly pump up an attacker? Play **Call Down the Lightning**.

Mixing and Matching for Killer Decks

Of course, the deck I outline in this chapter allows for just a small subset of cards in *Vs.* to be used. Even within *The Avengers* set, you can add a number of great rares to the deck. **Jarvis, Honorary Avenger** is a tiny 1 ATK/1 DEF, but he lets you search out an Avenger any time he defends, and then he comes back for more the next turn. On the opposite end of the spectrum, **Hulk** is a gigantic 17 ATK/17 DEF for 7 plus a discard of an Avengers leader; however, you can keep him from being stunned by paying 7 endurance. Even better, he gets bigger when you do this!

The Plot Twist cards are even more impressive. **Avengers Assemble!** lets you search out an Avenger from your deck and give that character — or any that shares a name with it — a +1 ATK/+1 DEF counter if you recruit it on that turn. And **Earth's Mightiest Heroes** provides the largest single one-shot bonus yet in the game — a whopping +7 ATK to an attacker in exchange for not playing any other Plot Twist cards that turn.

Plenty of other options exist, and I could write a whole book about them. If you've got the dough — usually between \$60 and \$80 — a good bet is simply to buy a box (24 booster packs) of whatever set you like and make a deck out of what you find. Each pack contains a foil version of one of the cards in the set, too!

Also, the next *Vs.* set hits stores in early 2006 and will focus on the X-Men. And if you really want your deck to look cool, more than 100 promotional versions of cards have been released as tournament prizes or as inserts with action figures and comics. They contain alternate or extended artwork and have a red serial number at the bottom. Sweet!

Chapter 6

Thrills, Skills, and Strategy for Everybody with Pokémon

In This Chapter

- ▶ Dragons and turtles and mice, oh my!
 - ▶ A peek at **Pikachu** and the game's other cards
 - ▶ Putting yourself inside a trainer's head
 - ▶ A trip through *Pokémon's* expansions
 - ▶ Bringing your monsters to battle!
 - ▶ Catchin' 'em all for your deck
 - ▶ Surfing the Poké-Web
-

We've all watched cartoons — from *Scooby-Doo* to *The Simpsons* — and we all recognize that they've perhaps taken over more than their fair share of our lives. But none hit quite as hard as *Pokémon* did when it came to taking over the minds — and tabletops — of kids everywhere. Originally created in Japan, the battling-monster 'toon made its way stateside in the late '90s, along with a series of Nintendo video games. Soon after, the trading card game version of the hot property came our way.

But this was no ordinary game. The allure of building up a stable of the game's "pocket monsters" — pokémon for short — training them, and then facing them off against friends' monsters proved to be incredibly strong for tons of kids (so much so that a number of schools banned the cards because they'd become such a distraction).



The term *pokémon* can be singular (representing a single monster) or plural. Keep this in mind as you read this chapter.

Over the years, the game has settled back into the realm of popularity seen by most other trading card games, but don't for moment think that it's on its last legs. It's still chugging along with new sets — coming up on 30! — a full seven years after hitting American shores. And despite the success among youngsters, it's actually got quite a bit of strategic depth and, hey, it's a lot of fun too!

Once upon a Time, a Yellow Mouse Appeared on a TV Show . . .

Mice are nice. Well, not those cheese-eating real ones you send your cat after, of course, but Mickey, Mighty, and Pikachu have all been popular enough to take their places in eternal pop culture. If you're saying, "Pika-who?" right now, I'm talking about the little yellow mouse that's the center of the *Pokémon* franchise.

Along with his trainer, Ash Ketchum, this spunky rodent has duked it out in countless matches with other pokémon over the years. Along the way, loads of other monsters have made their way onto the scene, from the fire-breathing dragon Charizard to the water-shooting turtle Squirtle to the smart-mouthed cat Meowth.



The real power behind the *Pokémon* trading card game — and what caused it to become such a smash hit — is the fact that its gameplay closely mirrors what happens in the cartoon. Just as in the show, you recruit an army of your favorite monsters, use various forms of energy to power them up, make use of cool training techniques, and then pit them against other people's monsters. Along the way, you're rotating your forces so you can ensure that you get good match-ups while giving your weakened monsters a chance to recover.



It's a good idea to make it clear to the kiddoes — and maybe even to some adults out there as well — that although *Pokémon*, like many other trading card games, is based on battling, you need to keep the fighting to the game itself. Just as the cartoon is just a TV show, the game is just that — a game. Even if Little Timmy finds himself losing due to extremely bad luck, he should remember that it's better to keep his cool than to upend the card table and scatter everyone's pieces to the four winds. Other folks will want to play with him more often if he chills out.

Sorting Out the Cards

In a trading card game, you assemble a deck of the best cards you can get a hold of in order to take on other players. But before you can do that, you gotta know what the cards do. In *Pokémon*, three types of cards make up the game: Energy cards, Pokémon cards, and Trainer cards. Each type plays a separate, unique part in the game, and you need all three of them in your deck in order to win.

The price of victory: Energy

You'll find six main types of Energy cards in *Pokémon*. They're your basic resources that you use to power your attacks and pay other costs. Energy cards simply say *Energy* in big letters at the top and have a large symbol showing what types of energy they produce, as shown in Figure 6-1. You play one of the following six Energy cards by attaching them underneath their corresponding *Pokémon* cards:



Figure 6-1:
Lightning
energy
focuses
electrical
power to
charge
up your
pokémon.

- ✓ **Fighting:** The **Fighting** energy type represents pokémon like **Hitmonchan** and **Machop** — guys who like to punch and kick in their attacks. It's also the energy type for many rock- and ground-type monsters like **Onix** and **Diglett**.
- ✓ **Fire:** The energy type natural to the fierce dragon **Charizard**, **Fire** is also the type associated with fiery horse **Rapidash**, legendary fox **Ninetales**, and fire elemental **Magmar**.
- ✓ **Grass:** Seed pokémon **Bulbasaur** and poison bee **Beedrill** are two of the many pokémon who make use of **Grass** energy.
- ✓ **Lightning:** This is the power source for **Pikachu** and its evolutionary form **Raichu**, as well as electric bird **Zapdos**.
- ✓ **Psychic:** The mind-controlling **Abra**, **Kadabra**, and **Alakazam** make use of this energy type, as do the tricky **Mr. Mime** and **Mewtwo**.
- ✓ **Water:** **Squirtle** is in his element with this energy type, as are the tadpole **Poliwag**, sea lion **Dewgong**, and vicious sea serpent **Gyarados**.

Sure, you can figure out that **Squirtle**'s name comes from "squirting turtle" or that **Charizard** comes from "char lizard." But did you know that Fighting pokémon **Hitmonchan** and **Hitmonlee** were named after martial arts expert actors Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee?



A number of other energy types appear in the game, but the only other one you'll see on a regular basis right away is the *colorless* energy type. It turns out that some kinds of attacks, rather than requiring a specific type of energy to pay their cost, allow any type of energy to be used. In exchange for the easier energy type costs, attacks that only need colorless energy generally cost more total energy to power them.

Your battling brigade: Pokémon

Pokémon cards — the cards that show the monsters themselves — are the lifeblood of the game. They give you a vast array of choices when deciding what powers and attacks suit your needs the best, plus they add a lot of personality to the game. Each pokémon has a set of traits and stats that make it different from all the other ones in the game. All that info can be confusing if you don't have a guide to what everything means, but hey, that's what you're here for!

Onix, shown in Figure 6-2, is a *basic* pokémon — that means you can play him straight onto the board without requiring any other specific pokémon to be in play first. Many other pokémon, on the other hand, say *Stage 1* or *Stage 2* just below the picture; this means that they're *evolution* pokémon — you need to have the pokémon specified next to the stage number in play before you can play the Stage 1 or 2 pokémon.



Figure 6-2:

Onix, a basic Fighting pokémon, has two cheap attacks.

Up in the top-right corner, **Onix** shows two important stats. The 80 HP means that it has 80 *hit points*, which show how tough the pokémon is. Many monsters have just 40 or 50 HP to start, so this is one tough cookie here — not surprising, considering that **Onix** is made of stone! The symbol next to the hit points is the Fighting energy symbol. This symbol shows what class of pokémon the card belongs to and usually matches up with the type of energy you need to spend on the card's attacks.

Looking down to the main text box, **Onix** has two lines in bold: *Horn Rush* and *Granite Head*. These are the names of its *attacks* — what it uses to battle with other pokémon. To the left are energy symbols showing how much energy you need to pay for each attack. A single energy of any type is enough to pay for the Horn Rush attack, while Granite Head needs a **Fighting Energy** card as well as another card of any type.



Many attacks have additional text that you follow when announcing the attack. Horn Rush's coin flip means that it'll work only half the time, so you want to use it only if you can't pay for Granite Head. Granite Head, on the other hand, has a bonus: It reduces by 10 any damage dealt to **Onix** by attacks on the opponent's next turn. You can use only one attack on each turn, so choose wisely!

To the right of the attack names are numbers: 10 for Horn Rush and 20 for Granite Head. This is the amount of *damage* that each attack deals to an opposing pokémon when they duel. The higher the number, the stronger the attack. Whenever the total amount of damage visited on an opposing pokémon is equal to or greater than its hit points (HP), it's knocked out and removed from play.

At the bottom of the **Onix** card, you can see its *Weakness* and *Resistance* fields. Each field can have one or more energy symbols beneath it. If a pokémon has weakness to a certain energy type, it takes double the damage from attacks by pokémon of that type. If it has resistance to a type, that means that it takes 30 less damage than it normally would. **Onix** is weak to water pokémon and has no resistance whatever to any kind of pokémon — a combination that balances out the fact that it has a higher HP than most basic pokémon.

Finally, at the bottom-right is the pokémon's *Retreat Cost*. If you need to duck your pokémon out of harm's way — *retreat* it — before it gets knocked out, this is the number of Energy cards you have to discard from the pokémon in order to do so.



Some pokémon have a *Poké-Power* listed above their attacks. You can play a Poké-Power during your turn when a power's text tells you that you can, and you can activate as many Poké-Powers as possible each turn, unlike attacks.

Tricks of the trade: Trainers

The human trainers from the show also play a big part in the trading card game. While they don't directly fight with each other, they're represented by Trainer cards that give orders to your pokémon to perform actions, increase your knowledge by drawing cards or searching them out of your deck, or any of a number of other cool effects. They give you ways to surprise your opponent with plays that aren't in front of you on the table. Trainer cards also encompass gadgets, techniques, and other tools you can use to help out your deck.

Trainer cards simply say *Trainer* at the top and have a simple action you perform with it, like healing a damaged pokémon (see Figure 6-3) or switching the places of two pokémon on the board. You simply play them and then do what they say.

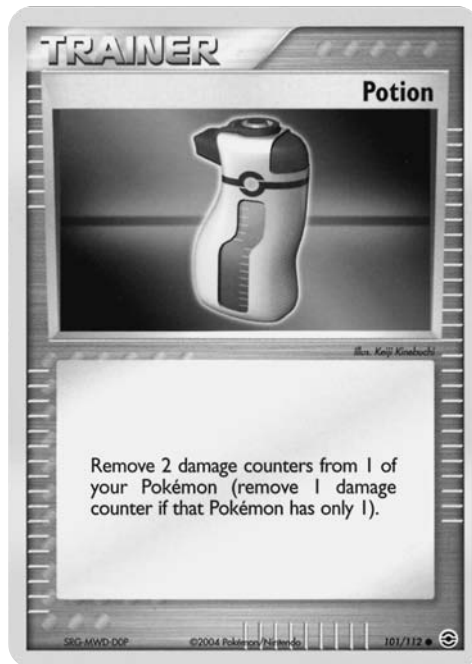


Figure 6-3: **Potion** can save your pokémon from being knocked out.

It's Not a Cartoon, but It Plays Like the One on TV

It's great to know what the cards do, but playing the game is what we're here for, right? Not to worry; I get into that right now. Every turn in a game of *Pokémon* brings something different, from new cards you'll draw from your deck to attacks and counterattacks with pokémon to surprise trainer moves. But each turn also has a structure and rules that guide it, forcing you to decide the best courses of action to take.

Just like the cards themselves, the format of the game's play takes its inspiration from the TV show. By drawing a new card each turn, you represent ever-increasing knowledge of your pokémon and how to train them. The attacks play much like in the show, too, symbolizing the back-and-forth nature of what happens when you drop two pokémon into an arena against each other.

You've got the following different ways to defeat your opponent in a *Pokémon* game:

- ✔ **Going after prize cards:** Each player lays out six face-down *prize cards* from the top of his or her deck at the beginning of the game. If you collect all of your prize cards first — taking one into your hand each time you knock out an opposing pokémon — you win the game.
- ✔ **Emptying an opponent's deck:** A second path to victory is much slower, but can be just as deadly if you've set up your deck to ward off fast attacks. If a player can't draw a card at the beginning of his or her turn due to an empty deck, the opponent wins.
- ✔ **The “Crush the Opposition” approach:** Finally, if you manage to knock out all of your opponent's pokémon, that seals the deal for your victory, too!

Kicking off the game

At the beginning of the game, use a coin, die, Magic 8-Ball, or any other random method to determine who goes first. Each player has a *deck* of exactly 60 cards from which to draw, plus a *discard pile* next to it — this is where used cards and knocked-out pokémon end up. Shuffle your deck and then draw a *hand* of seven cards from it. If you have no basic pokémon in your hand, reveal your hand to your opponent, shuffle it back into your deck and then draw a new hand of seven cards. This reshuffling and drawing of a new hand is called a *mulligan*, and your opponent gets to draw an extra card if you're forced to do this. If neither player gets a basic pokémon initially, each player takes a mulligan, but no one gets an extra card.

Now, you each choose a basic pokémon from your hand and place it face-down in front of you as your *active pokémon* — the one that'll be doing the attacking and defending. Next, put down up to five more basic pokémon (face-down) between you and the active pokémon. This is your *bench* — the reserve pokémon that you use to replace your active pokémon when it's knocked out or retreated. (Keep in mind that the bench can only hold up to five pokémon at any point in the game.)

So far, so good. Now the fun part — the prizes! Take the top six cards of your deck and place them off to the side, face-down. These become your prize cards, and you get one whenever an opposing pokémon gets knocked out. You can't look at them until you win them, and remember, when you get all six, you win!

After you've done this, flip over all your pokémon on the board. Now you're ready to start battling!

Bringing pokémon to life

First, the easy part — draw a card at the beginning of your turn. If you're the first player in a game, skip your first card draw, but draw future cards normally. This gives the second player a chance to pull even with the first player.

Now you've got a bunch of choices. With the exception of attaching Energy cards and retreating your active pokémon, you can do each of the following as many times in a turn as you like — with some restrictions — and in any order you'd like:



- ✔ **Take any number of basic pokémon from your hand and place them face-up on your bench.** Remember, you can only have up to five pokémon there.
- ✔ **Evolve your active pokémon or any of the ones on your bench.** Remember those Stage 1 and 2 pokémon? They'll tell you from whom they evolve. If you've got a match, just put the new one on top of the old one. Basic pokémon evolve into Stage 1s; Stage 1s evolve into Stage 2s.

You can evolve a specific monster only once per turn, and you can't do it on the turn in which you put it into play from your hand or on the first turn of the game.
- ✔ **Attach an Energy card to one of your pokémon.** You can attach a card only once per turn.
- ✔ **Play a Trainer card.** Just announce them, do what they say, and place them in your discard pile. Some Trainer cards say *Supporter* or *Stadium* on them; you can play only one of each type per turn.
- ✔ **Use a Poké-Power.** Both active pokémon and benched pokémon can use a Poké-Power if they have one associated with them. If they do, you'll find it listed on their cards above their attacks — and remember, they don't count against your attack for the turn.
- ✔ **Retreat a pokémon.** If you feel that your active pokémon is in danger of being knocked out or if you've just got a better bench monster that's ready to battle, pay the retreat cost by discarding the listed number of energy cards and then switch the places of the two pokémon. All remaining cards and any accumulated damage on those two monsters stay where they are, except for the energy you had to discard. You can only do this once per turn.

Time to battle!

Now for the part you've been waiting for — the attack! This is the last thing you do on your turn, so make sure you're done with everything else first. Figure out which of your active pokémon's attacks you want to use and then check its attached energy to make sure you can pay for it. (Unlike with retreating, you don't have to discard these energy cards unless the attack says that you have to.) Check the weakness or resistance of your opponent's active pokémon — the *defending* pokémon — and then let it fly! Calculate how much damage your attack inflicts on the defending pokémon and then put a *damage counter* on that pokémon for every 10 units of damage it has sustained. (These counters stay on the pokémon until it's knocked out or healed.) Follow any other instructions of the attack now, too.

Now, if any pokémon has damage on it greater than or equal to its hit points, it's knocked out. Whoever controls it puts it into his or her discard pile and replaces it with a pokémon from the bench. Remember — if your opponent can't do this, you win! When you knock out an opposing pokémon, take a prize card into your hand. Now your turn's done.

Each player continues in this manner, alternating turns. When one player reaches any of the victory conditions — gaining all six prize cards, emptying an opponent's deck, or vanquishing all opposing pokémon on the table — the game is over and that player wins the game!



Many attacks have extra effects in addition to their damage. The most common ones you'll see are called *special conditions*. Each one has a specific effect on the pokémon until the condition is removed or the pokémon evolves. These conditions are as follows:

- ✓ **Sleeping pokémon can't attack or retreat.** If an attack puts your pokémon to sleep, turn it sideways to show this and then flip a coin at the end of each player's turn. If it comes up heads, the pokémon wakes up and can act normally again, but if it's tails, you have to wait another turn to try and wake it up.
- ✓ **Burned pokémon are susceptible to extra damage.** Mark a burned pokémon with a burn counter. Flip a coin after each player's turn. If you flip tails, put two damage counters on the pokémon, disregarding weakness and resistance.
- ✓ **Confused pokémon can attack only half the time they normally could.** Flip a coin when it tries to attack. When you flip heads, it attacks normally, but if tails comes up, put three damage counters on it. (Be sure to turn it with its head facing you to show that it's confused. You can still retreat it normally, and if you do, it loses all of its special conditions.)



- ✓ **Paralyzed pokémon can't attack or retreat and are turned sideways to show this.** If your pokémon was *asleep*, you'd have to flip heads to get your pokémon back in action. Not so with paralyzed pokémon; all you have to do to get them back in the game is wait until the end of your next turn and then recover it.
- ✓ **Poisoned pokémon get a damage counter on them after each player's turn.** Mark a poisoned pokémon with a poison counter.

The asleep, confused, and paralyzed conditions override each other, so only the latest one applies. Other conditions don't interfere with these.

Exploring the Many Pokémon Sets

One great thing about *Pokémon's* huge popularity is that it gave its producer, Wizards of the Coast — and later Nintendo and Pokémon USA — a great reason to keep pumping out new sets of cards, not to mention tons of marketing dough to support it. Seven years after the game's U.S. release, about 30 sets and 3,000 cards are available. Obviously, I can't list them all here — they'd be enough for a book of their own — but the following sections let you have a look at some of the more notable cards and sets the game has seen.

- ✓ **The Base Set:** Printed in *First* and *Unlimited Editions* — the former of which is much rarer and more expensive than the latter — these 102-card sets showcased the debut of most of *Pokémon's* most famous and popular monsters. **Pikachu**, **Charizard**, **Squirtle**, and **Bulbasaur** showed up here first, as did **Professor Oak**, a trainer whose ability to let you draw seven cards for a new hand was considered the most powerful in the early days of the game. Mechanically, the cards were pretty basic as far as attacks and powers went because players were just learning the game at the time. Many of these cards would be reprinted in later sets like *Base Set 2* and *Legendary Collection* to give newer players a chance to grab them more easily. Keep in mind that organized tournaments using the *Unlimited* format allow every card from the base set onward.



Like nearly every other trading card game, *Pokémon* cards come in several different rareness categories within the booster packs and starter deck in which they're sold. *Common* cards, which come about nine to a booster pack, show a small black circle in the bottom-right corner. *Uncommons*, which are three to a pack, have a black diamond, and *rare*s — just one per pack — have a black star. Sometimes rare are replaced with ultra-rare holographic cards. Most of these have a black star as well and have a distinctive foil picture. A few ultra-rare, like the pokémon-EX, have a white star and are really hard to find!

- ✓ **Jungle:** The second set, *Jungle*, introduces more of *Pokémon*'s original 151 monsters, with a focus on grass pokémon, such as **Scyther**, **Vileplume**, and **Butterfree**. Its 64 cards contain 63 pokémon and just one trainer, **Poké Ball**, which lets you fetch any pokémon from your deck if you win a coin flip.
 - ✓ **Fossil:** A 62-card set, *Fossil* has a bent toward Fighting and Water pokémon, like kicker **Hitmonlee** and legendary bird **Articuno**. It fills out the original set of monsters, except for the evasive psychic pokémon **Mew**, which later became available as a promo.
 - ✓ **Southern Islands:** With just 18 cards, *Southern Islands* is available only as a boxed set. **Mew** debuted here, as did new-generation Egg pokémon **Togepi** and the bouncing blue **Marill**.
 - ✓ **Team Rocket:** Named after the bad guys in the cartoon, *Team Rocket* has “dark” versions of many of the original pokémon. These “dark” versions have stronger attacks than their counterparts but are easier to knock out due to their lower HP. The set also features the game's first ultra-rare, the secret **Dark Raichu**, who didn't appear on any official checklists for the set.
 - ✓ **Gym Heroes** and **Gym Challenge:** Packing versions of pokémon that were trained by specific people from the cartoon, the “gym” pokémon are strong but generally have expensive attacks. Each of the following six main energy types has its own trainer:
 - **Blaine** stokes the flames of fire monsters **Moltres**, **Ninetales**, and **Magmar**.
 - **Brock** rocks with fighting pokémon **Rhydon**, **Onix**, and **Mankey**.
 - **Erika** cultivates the grass pokémon **Victreebel**, **Exeggcute**, and **Gloom**.
 - **Lt. Surge** charges up lightning monsters **Electabuzz** and **Pikachu**.
 - **Misty** swims with water pokémon **Psyduck**, **Poliwrath**, and **Tentacool**.
 - **Sabrina** minds the psychic monsters **Mewtwo**, **Jynx**, and **Mr. Mime**.
- Team Rocket**, **Giovanni**, and **Koga** also receive a few pokémon of their own, and colorless monsters like **Dratini** and **Snorlax** are spread out among the trainers.
- ✓ **Neo Genesis**, **Neo Discovery**, **Neo Revelation**, and **Neo Destiny:** *Neo* sets were the first to focus on the new generation of pokémon created after the first 151. Powerful new pokémon, like the volcanic **Typhlosion** and the silver bird **Lugia**, whose multicolored 90-HP attack was so powerful that it required a discard of three of its Energy cards, showed that monsters didn't need a whole lot of previous name recognition to become player favorites.



The *Neo* sets also debuted the Metal and Darkness energy types, which had pokémon of their own, like the armored bird **Skarmory** and the sinister, thieving crow **Murkrow**. While these are new energy types, the Energy cards don't count as basic energy, so you can have only four of each of these new energy types per deck. New here too were baby pokémon, who have low HP totals but can be attacked only if the opponent wins a coin flip. They count as basic pokémon, too, so you can play them as if they were basic.

- ✓ **Expedition, Aquapolis, and Skyridge:** Featuring new versions of most of the previous pokémon, *Expedition, Aquapolis, and Skyridge* were the first cards to utilize a scannable pattern along the edge of the card, which can be used in tandem with the Pokémon video games. These were also the last sets printed by Wizards of the Coast before the game's license reverted to Nintendo.
- ✓ **EX Ruby & Sapphire:** Nintendo's first set on its own, *Ruby & Sapphire* introduced *pokemon-EX*. Still around in new sets, they're all huge and possess strong attacks, but have a special drawback: If a pokémon-EX gets knocked out, the opponent gets to take *two* prize cards instead of one! Yet another generation of pokémon — the *Ruby & Sapphire* monsters from the video game line — debuted here as well. Organized tournaments using the RS-on Modified format only allow cards from this set onward.
- ✓ **EX Sandstorm:** New pokémon-EX abound in *Sandstorm EX*, many of whom have huge HP stats but also have two different types of weakness. Also, Fossil Trainer cards first showed up here; they act like basic pokémon and can be evolved into other pokémon.
- ✓ **EX Team Magma vs. Team Aqua:** Focusing on the battles between Team Magma and Team Aqua pokémon, this set had the first *dual-energy*-type monsters — meaning that their attacks count as both types. These critters are pretty nice if an opposing pokémon has weakness to either type; resistance to either will count against the pokémon under attack. Pokémons on the same team also work better if more than one member of the same team are in play.
- ✓ **EX Hidden Legends:** In addition to the new Stadium Trainer cards — only one of which can be in play at a time — *Hidden Legends* also features a special pokémon called **Castform** that gets more powerful if the right stadium is in play. Organized tournaments using the HL-on Modified (Hidden Legends onward) format allow only cards from this set onward.
- ✓ **EX FireRed & LeafGreen:** No new rules here, but the set's notable for having EX versions of faves like **Charizard**, **Blastoise**, and **Venusaur**. **Charizard EX**, like its other incarnations, remains one of the most expensive and sought-after cards in the game.

- ✓ **EX Team Rocket Returns:** More dual-type pokémon show up in *Team Rocket Returns*, but with a sinister twist: They're all combinations of darkness and another type. The “star,” or “shining,” pokémon started here too. They're pretty strong — and even stronger when you've fallen behind — but are limited to just one total copy per deck due to their power.
 - ✓ **EX Deoxys:** Focusing on the powerful pokémon **Deoxys** and **Rayquaza**, the set has new “star” pokémon who work well against pokémon-EX.
 - ✓ **EX Emerald:** Containing new EX versions of **Deoxys** and **Rayquaza** — as well as perennial favorite **Raichu** — *Emerald* also has sweet-looking new versions of the basic Energy cards.
 - ✓ **EX Unseen Forces:** The 28 different **Unown** cards — animated versions of letters and punctuation marks — in the *Unseen Forces* set each have the power to shuffle themselves into your deck and exchange places with any other **Unown** there, as well as unique powers of their own.
- Nintendo USA releases new sets for *Pokémon* about four times a year; *EX Delta Species* was the last one, hitting shelves in the fall of 2005. Additionally, numerous cards have been released for promotional purposes. These are generally denoted with a “promo” star symbol on the card.

Assembling Your First Deck

Building a deck for the first time can be a bit intimidating, but there are some easy guidelines to follow when you're starting out that should give you a good idea of what goes into a decent deck. In order to ensure that you draw the right ratio of pokémon, trainers, and energy, a good rule to stick by is to aim for the following:



- ✓ **25–30 Pokémon:** Of these, you want about four basic pokémon of a given name for every two Stage 1 evolution versions of that card.
Most Stage 2s are hard to get, so don't worry about those yet, but you don't normally want more than one copy of a specific Stage 2 in a deck.
- ✓ **10–15 Trainers:** These can be a mix of energy searchers, ways to retrieve cards from your discard pile, or any other effect that you think helps your deck.
- ✓ **20–25 Energy cards:** Usually, these will just be basic energy, but more advanced decks (or decks playing with Darkness or Metal pokémon) use other types as well.



The deck must hold *exactly* 60 cards, with no more than four of any card except basic energy cards. Also, you generally want to use two energy types. Using one leaves you too prone to resistance, while using more than two opens you up to not being able to draw the right Energy cards when you need them.

Because the last couple of sets — *EX Emerald* and *EX Unseen Forces* — should be the easiest for you to grab hold of right now, I give you a look at a deck that uses only commons and uncommons from those sets. I use Fire and Water pokémon here just because I like them, but you can pair up any two types just fine.

Packing extra punch

The deck I put together in this chapter stays away from rare, ultra-rare, promo, super-duper-rare, way-crazy-hard-to-get, ludicrously-amazingly-scarce, and any other cards that'll cost you more than a quarter or so at your Friendly Local Game Store. But if you want to beef up a deck like this, you'll want some of those.

The most straightforward changes you can make here are to add Stage 2 and/or EX versions of cards that evolve from the pokémon in the deck. *EX Emerald* has **Camerupt EX**, which not only can't be Asleep or Paralyzed, but can also either deal 30 damage and Burn a pokémon for two Energy cards with its Searing Flame attack, or hit for up to an enormous 100 damage for just three Energy cards with Eruption. Remember, though, that your opponent will take two prize cards if he or she manages to deal 120 points of damage to it and knock it out, so be careful when you play it to make sure it hangs around.

Unseen Forces, meanwhile, has **Typhlosion**, which evolves from **Quilava**. Its Poké-Power adds 10 damage to each active pokémon between each turn, while its Flickering Flames attack hits for 20 and puts the opposing pokémon to Sleep

for just one Energy card. But its big strength is its Rage attack, which needs just three Energy cards to dish out 50 damage plus 10 for each damage counter on **Typhlosion**. It can hold plenty of them too, with a hit point stat of 110.

On the water side, **Luvdisc** and **Corsola** don't get any more evolutions, but *EX Emerald* gives **Marshtomp** a nice Stage 2 evolution in **Swampert**. Its Water Cyclone Poké-Power allows you to move Water energy — as many times as you want on your turn — from your active pokémon to your benched pokémon. Its Spinning Tail deals 10 damage directly to each opposing pokémon, while **Swampert**'s three-energy Aqua Sonic attack hits for 60 damage and doesn't get neutralized by resistance.

You can also toy with any of the many previous versions of the above cards or try plugging in some more of the game's numerous EX and "star" pokémon if you're feeling bold. Also, try experimenting with special Energy cards like **Double Rainbow Energy**, which can be attached only to an evolved pokémon; it reduces your pokémon's attack damage by 10, but provides two energy of any type on just one card.

For your Fire pokémon, a good base is as follows:

- ✓ 4 copies of **Numel** (*EX Emerald*)
- ✓ 2 copies of **Camerupt** (*EX Emerald*)
- ✓ 4 copies of **Cyndaquil** (*EX Unseen Forces*)
- ✓ 2 copies of **Quilava** (*EX Unseen Forces*)

Numel's got a cheap card-drawing attack for just one energy, while its evolved version, **Camerupt**, can Burn opposing pokémon and also hit for extra damage against pokémon-EX. Meanwhile, **Cyndaquil** can Paralyze a pokémon or hit cheaply for 30 damage. Its Stage 1 evolution, **Quilava**, stops half of the defending pokémon's attacks and can also hit for 40 damage for three Energy cards.

Your Water pokémon should be these cards:

- ✓ 4 copies of **Luvdisc** (*EX Emerald*)
- ✓ 4 copies of **Mudkip** (*EX Emerald*)
- ✓ 2 copies of **Marshtomp** (*EX Emerald*)
- ✓ 4 copies of **Corsola** (*EX Unseen Forces*)

Luvdisc's Call for Friend attack is great in your deck, taking a basic pokémon from your deck and putting it straight onto your bench. It can also hit for 20 damage and Confuse the enemy. For just a single energy, **Mudkip** can hit for 10 damage, plus an extra 10 damage half the time; its evolution, **Marshtomp**, can either make opposition Asleep or nail it for a whopping 50 damage for just three Energy cards. And **Corsola** can search out any pokémon from your deck and put it into your hand; alternately, it can directly hit two opposing benched pokémon for 10 damage each!

For Trainer cards, go with these:

- ✓ 2 **Lanette's Net Search** (*EX Emerald*)
- ✓ 4 **Professor Birch** (*EX Emerald*)
- ✓ 4 **Mary's Request** (*EX Unseen Forces*)

All of these are supporter cards, which are limited to one per turn, but because they each net you tons of cards, that's all you should need. **Lanette's Net Search** fetches up to three basic pokémon from your deck and puts them into your hand, while **Professor Birch** lets you draw cards until you have six in your hand — make sure to wait until your hand is empty or close to it so you can get the maximum benefits from the Prof. And **Mary's Request**, which normally draws you only one card, always draws you three cards in this deck because you get the extras if you don't have any Stage 2 pokémon in play.

Finally, your Energy cards should be as follows:

- ✓ 12 **Fire Energy**
- ✓ 12 **Water Energy**

You're close enough between the two energy types as far as number of pokémon in the deck (and their attacks) that an even balance ensures that you draw enough Energy cards when you need them.

Plugging into the Online Poké-munity

If you can easily access the Internet, it's a snap to find more specific information about the *Pokémon* trading card game. Here are a few Web sites you'll want to check out:

- ✓ www.pokemon-tcg.com: At the official Nintendo Web site for the game, you can find news, press releases, tournament rules, and loads of other breaking developments in the game. It also has full card lists and text for every Nintendo-made *Pokémon* card, as well as a searchable card database and strategy tips.
- ✓ www.pokemon.com: The official Pokémon USA site, this covers the broader *Pokémon* world, complete with a "Pokédex" so you can look up info on your favorite pokémon, info about the TV show, and a ton more.
- ✓ www.poj.com: One of the game's oldest and most active Web sites holds a wealth of strategy articles, from beginner to top tournament player level. It also has info on the game's Japanese cards, price lists, news bites, and a handy Card of the Day feature, plus related pages for the many Pokémon video games.

Chapter 7

Defending Your Honor in Legend of the Five Rings

In This Chapter

- ▶ Knowing your strongholds from your senses
 - ▶ Charging into battle
 - ▶ Touring the game's vast history
 - ▶ Assembling a fearsome force
 - ▶ Putting your gold to work
 - ▶ Journeying to fellow players' distant realms
-

Who doesn't enjoy a good story? Every good movie, TV drama, or book tells an interesting one, and the best leave you wanting to turn each page or watch each episode all the way through. Trading card games, though, have mostly followed a different path. Most decent ones have survived on solid play mechanics rather than leading fans along a game-focused plot line.

Legend of the Five Rings (commonly known as *L5R*) has bucked that trend. Since its inception in 1995, *L5R* has gone through several different story arcs, intertwining the results of tournaments and other events with the development of new card sets. Those players whose clans were good enough to dominate on the play field were able to crown their leaders as emperors of Rokugan, the feudal-era Japanese-themed empire in which the game is set. Those who fell were relegated to lesser fates.

That's not to say that *L5R* is a bad game that rests on a storyline crutch. Quite the contrary — it's not only one of the most intriguing and complex games out there, but it has also managed to grab enough adherents for it to be one of just a handful of trading card games to be continuously published for at least a decade. It's even survived changing ownership from the Five Rings Publishing Group to Wizards of the Coast and then to its current publisher, Alderac Entertainment Group. You can't do that with just any old game.

Spinning a Legendary Story

The depth of the world of *Legend of the Five Rings* is vast, with not just tens or hundreds, but thousands of different characters, monsters, weapons, and more. Eight major *clans* — along with two other *factions* — constantly fight for control of Rokugan, with each of them relying on a different set of tactics, values, and fighting principles. Alliances form and then crumble just as quickly as they were assembled.

Whole books could be written about each clan — wait, scratch that. Numerous *L5R* novels *have* been written, and the roleplaying game version of *L5R* has already had tons of books written for it, giving each clan hundreds of pages of background. Here's a quick look at each clan, so you can get a sense of who these folks are and what they stand for:

- ✔ **Crab:** Warriors to the end, they ignore politics, preferring to focus strictly on the battlefield. They fiercely defend Rokugan against the evil forces of the Shadowlands. In addition to their *samurai*, who are a major part of nearly every faction, *berserkers* are prevalent here.
- ✔ **Crane:** The perfectionists. Everything must conform to stringent standards, from their artistry to their fighting forms. *Courtiers* are a common group seen in the Crane.
- ✔ **Dragon:** *Monks* and *shugenja* — the wizards of Rokugan — are a big part of this mysterious clan. They favor enlightenment, honor, and truth and generally separate themselves from the politics of other clans.
- ✔ **Lion:** Master *tacticians*, the Lions are the strongest military force in the land.
- ✔ **Mantis:** Outcasts from the Crab clan, the Mantis are now the rulers of the high seas.
- ✔ **Phoenix:** These people are all about magic and avoid violence in favor of sorcery. You'll see lots of *shugenja* in this clan.
- ✔ **Scorpion:** Deadly and devious, they're the underhanded side of Rokugani politics. *Courtiers* show up here, but often as a back door to controlling the empire. Honor's not what you'd call one of their strong suits.
- ✔ **Unicorn:** Seasoned world travelers, they best know the ways of other cultures. They've got a strong mounted *cavalry*.

In addition to these eight great clans, *L5R* features the following two other major factions:

- ✔ **Ratling:** A race of humanoid rats, these tribal beings have formed their warriors into fierce hunting packs.
- ✔ **Shadowlands Horde:** The evil demons of the *L5R* world, they're the ones against whom the clans fight to protect the land of Rokugan. Honor has no meaning to them, and as you see in the next section, they play by different rules in the game itself.

You'll also see a number of *unaligned* creatures in *L5R*, such as the great elemental dragons. Also, in different storylines, you'll see the ebb and flow of different clan alliances. With such a great depth of clans, it should come as no surprise that there's a lot to see in the game itself as well.

Seeking an Understanding of the Cards

One of the cool elements of the game is the different ways you can win, each of which utilizes vastly different tactics. Good players must be able to defend against and defeat all of these strategies. The different victories are as follows:

- ✔ You can achieve a *military victory* by destroying all provinces controlled by your opponent (or opponents — the game plays just as well, if not better, in multiplayer mode) or by dishonoring them so much that their family honor falls below -19 units. Each player normally starts with four provinces in play, so this takes a lot of power to achieve.
- ✔ If you start a turn with 40 or more family honor units, you gain an *honor victory*. Shadowlands players, having no sense of the word *honor*, can't achieve this and can't gain or lose honor. They also can't force other players to lose honor unconditionally.
- ✔ If you're able to assemble each of the five elemental rings and put them into play — each of which has a complex task required to play it — you win the game via an *enlightenment victory*, having mastered each element of air, earth, fire, water, and the void.

When you thumb through a starter deck of *Legend of the Five Rings* cards — at a whopping 84 cards, one of the biggest decks you'll see in the trading card game genre — you'll see a ton of stats all over the place, not to mention loads of colorful borders. It can be pretty daunting, even with the rule book you find in any *Lotus Edition* deck. In order to help you keep things straight, the next few sections give you a quick guide to each of the game's card types.

Strongholds: Home sweet home

Your *stronghold* card shows the temple or other edifice that represents your home base. It sets the starting stats for your deck and has one or more special abilities as well. Strongholds start the gameplay and can't be destroyed.

You'll see these three numbers along the right side of each stronghold, right below the *clan symbol*:

- ✓ The topmost number shows the *province strength*, which is 7 on the Lion Clan's **Shiro no Yojin**, seen in Figure 7-1. This represents how tough a province is to overthrow and, like the other stats in *L5R*, can later be modified.
- ✓ The middle number shows the stronghold's *gold production* — 3 for **Shiro no Yojin**. This shows how much gold a stronghold card can give you to spend on other cards.
- ✓ The bottom number is your *starting family honor* — 6 for **Shiro no Yojin**. The higher your starting family honor, the easier it is to play personalities and the closer you are to achieving an honor victory.

Two other card types that start in play — should you choose to include them with your deck — are *winds* and *senseis*. Winds represent the political leanings of your deck and involve the Imperial Favor, a game element that provides additional abilities whenever you're able to possess it. Senseis represent the master teachers for your deck's personalities and provide more abilities as well as altering some starting stats.

In *L5R*, you play with two separate decks — a *dynasty* deck and a *fate* deck. Dynasty cards have black backs and represent the *personalities* that make up your armies as well as the holdings you control, which provide gold and other services for you. More advanced dynasty decks also use *event* cards and *region* cards, which provide additional game effects.

Fate decks have green backs and are made up mostly of the *action* cards that you play to advance the game and the *followers* who make your personalities more formidable. You'll also see *items* (including special weapons), magical *spells*, and the elemental *rings* in this deck.



Figure 7-1:
Shiro no Yojin is one of the fierce Lion Clan's home bases.



The dynasty deck provides more resources for your side of the table throughout the game, while the fate deck replenishes your hand with tricks that you can use to swing the game in your favor.

Personalities: Your main forces

As the core of your dynasty deck, the range of personality cards you'll encounter in *L5R* is quite broad, spanning everything from warriors to ninjas to evil spirits. Each card also has a hefty bunch of keywords and stats associated with it that you'll definitely need to know how to use. I describe these in the following list:

- ✓ On the top left of a personality card is the card's *force* (often abbreviated *F*). This shows how strong the card is in battle. **Hida Kosedo**, shown in Figure 7-2, has a force of 3.
- ✓ On the right is the card's *chi* (often abbreviated *C*), which indicates how spiritually focused a personality is. It's mainly used in dueling directly with other personalities. If a character's chi ever reaches 0, that personality is destroyed. **Hida Kosedo**'s chi is 2.



Figure 7-2: **Hida Kosedo** is one of the Crab Clan's typical hard-fighting samurai.

- ✔ In the center of the card are three numbers. On the left is the card's *honor requirement*. You must have at least that much family honor at the time you play the card in order to play the card at all. **Hida Kosedo**'s honor requirement is 0, so he can be played early in the game.
- ✔ Next to the honor requirement is the card's *gold cost*. You must be able to pay at least that much gold to bring the card into play. **Hida Kosedo** costs 6.
- ✔ On the right is the personality's *personal honor*. This shows how much family honor you can gain for playing the personality and what followers can be attached. **Hida Kosedo** is a fairly cheap guy to play, so any rewards for playing him are going to be pretty slim as well — in fact, he's only been given a personal honor of 1.
- ✔ The text box below these numbers shows any additional abilities that the personality has. Any words in boldface are called *keywords*; many of these denote specific abilities, while others simply allow for other cards to *key* off of them — gain further bonuses or penalties because both cards are in play. **Hida Kosedo** is a Crab Clan samurai, so he is affected by any card that affects Crab Clan members and/or samurai.



Legend of the Five Rings cards have a few symbols and codes that don't affect gameplay directly, but have relevance outside the game. On the bottom corners of most cards, you'll see one or two Japanese symbols, commonly called "bugs." These represent the storylines in which a given card can be played. On **Hida Kosedo**, the one on the bottom right means that he can be played in *Lotus Edition* tournaments — the current storyline — while the bottom-left one means he's also legal for *Diamond Edition* tournaments — the previous story arc. Other previous editions include *Gold* and *Jade*.

In the middle of the card's bottom border is a series of letters representing what expansion a card comes from. "CoB" on **Hida Kosedo** means that he's from the *Code of Bushido* set. The cards you see in the starting deck I outline later in this chapter all come from the *Lotus Edition* set, so they'll have an "LE" in this space.



The *Lotus Edition* set is simply the cornerstone for *Lotus Edition* tournaments, if you're confused by the duplicate names. Any card with a Lotus bug can be played in *Lotus Edition* tournaments.

To the right of the expansion markings are the card's artist and copyright info, then two numbers separated by a symbol. The first number is the card's serial number in a set and the second is that set's size. Common cards have a circle in the middle, while uncommons have a diamond, and rares have a five-pointed star. Fixed starter deck cards have a star inside a circle. Also, each rare in every set from the past few years can be found in a shiny foil version, too! Finally, cards from special promotions show an inverted triangle.

Holdings: The rich get richer

Your stronghold gives you a starting amount of gold, but it's pretty small in the grand scheme of things. Another key part of your dynasty deck, holdings enable you to increase your wealth so you can pay to recruit personalities and other cards to your army. In the middle of a holding card, you'll find its gold cost. **Rice Paddy**, shown in Figure 7-3, has a cost of 2. In the card's top-right corner, it shows the amount of gold that you'll most often get from that holding. You produce gold from a holding by *bowing* it — turning it sideways from its *straightened* position — to show that it has been used for the turn and can't normally be used until it straightens again.



Rice Paddy also has a nice defensive ability. Instead of producing gold for a turn, you can bow and destroy it to hold off an opposing attacker.



Figure 7-3:
Rice Paddy's
 a basic but
 effective
L5R holding.

Your other dynasty deck cards have simpler layouts. Event cards are simply played, usually for free, and have a one-time game effect. And you can attach up to one region card per province to give it additional abilities.

The fate deck: What's happenin' now!

Action cards, like event cards, are one-shot effects, but they're part of your fate deck, so you normally have more control over them because you play them from your hand. Most actions are free, but some have gold costs, which are found in the center of the card. Additionally, actions, as well as all of your other fate deck cards, have another number in a black circle at the bottom of the card. This is the card's *focus value*, which helps determine the outcome of duels between two personalities.

Destiny Has No Secrets, seen in Figure 7-4, has a gold cost of 0 and a focus value of 1. Its chief purpose, though, is to give you a cheap way to pump a personality's force and chi by 2 each.



Figure 7-4:
Destiny Has No Secrets
trades
hidden info
for person-
ality power.

L5R uses four different types of action cards, which are differentiated by when you can play them. I get to the phases of the game soon, but here's a quick rundown of the action types:

- ✓ **Limited actions** can be played only during your own action phase.
- ✓ **Open actions** can be played during anyone's action phase or battle action segment.
- ✓ **Battle actions** can be played during any battle action segment.
- ✓ **Reactions** can be played in response to any other game state that triggers that particular action.

Going down the mental list of cards that make up your fate deck, you come to followers, a group of folks who work like personalities, but who — surprise, surprise — can't be used independently. Instead, they must be attached to existing personalities in play. They increase the force of the personality's unit without affecting the personality himself.

Why *L5R* players love their clans — and their game — so deeply

At the core of *Legend of the Five Rings* is a single concept — honor. The idea doesn't simply involve the cards in the game, though; it extends throughout its players as well. They'll fiercely — almost religiously — defend the game and their chosen clan, going so far as to wear traditional Japanese garb in their clan colors when playing in tournaments or attending conventions.

The fact that the players influence the storyline of the game — which in turn influences future cards, which subsequently changes later tournaments — gives players a tie to the game that most other trading card games don't have. They feel a personal bond created by the simple fact that *they*, and not just the designers of the

game, can directly lead their clan to victory, both in the real world and in the legendary world of Rokugan.

Players have been known to want their clan to succeed so strongly that they've offered ridiculously large bounties to tournament champions in return for imposing storyline changes of their desire. At one famous Gen Con occasion, the president of *L5R* publisher Alderac Entertainment Group offered a bounty of everything *L5R*-related in his office — including the original artwork for the five *Imperial Edition* elemental rings — to see his clan achieve its goal, while another player countered that offer with more than \$10,000 worth of *L5R* cards and memorabilia!

Followers have the same stats as personalities, plus a focus value. They can attach to any personality whose personal honor is greater than or equal to the follower's honor requirement. So Figure 7-5's **Ashigaru Archers**, who have an honor requirement of 1, can be attached to **Hida Kosedo**, who has a personal honor of 1. Just remember that you need to pay their gold cost of 2 as well.



It's true that the **Ashigaru Archers** don't provide you with any additional honor, but they *do* have a couple of neat abilities. The first one allows you to draw another card into your hand after you play this one, and the second allows you to directly attack an opposing force. More on that in a bit.

Item cards — yet another possible component of your fate deck — represent the weapons, artifacts, and other things that you can use to strengthen your personalities. **Crippled Bone Blade**, a Ratling-based weapon shown in Figure 7-6, gives a +2F/+1C bonus to an equipped personality, but at a steep honor cost to any human who uses it. It also turns any Ratling into a samurai, which can certainly benefit the Ratling when playing cards that help out samurais.

Spell cards, which are playable only by shugenja, also show up in some fate decks, as do the elemental rings, which have unique game effects and also enable you to achieve an enlightenment victory if you get all five into play at the same time. (For more on the different kinds of victories out there, see the "Seeking an Understanding of the Cards" section, earlier in the chapter.)



Figure 7-5:
Ashigaru Archers can strike unwitting enemies from afar.



Figure 7-6:
Crippled Bone Blade is an easy bonus for Ratlings, but not so easy for humans.

Witnessing a Most Honorable Challenge

The field of play in *Legend of the Five Rings* has the following different areas:

- ✓ On your left is your dynasty deck, with the *dynasty discard pile* next to it. Cards that are *destroyed* from play are put into this discard pile sideways, while ones that you've *discarded* go in straight up. In front of these are your stronghold, plus your sensei and wind if you've decided to play them.
- ✓ Directly in front of you are your provinces. Normally, you start with four province spaces, and each one holds one dynasty card. Provinces generally get refilled immediately whenever they're empty. If one gets destroyed, remove it so you can close any gaps that might occur when you remove a province from the row and discard all cards that were in the destroyed province.
- ✓ On your right are your fate deck and your *fate discard pile*.
- ✓ In front of your provinces is your *home*. This is where you place cards that you control.
- ✓ You can hold up to eight cards in your hand. If this *maximum hand size* is exceeded at certain given times during a game, you must discard down to that number.

Additionally, the orientation of cards on the board is important. Follow these tips:

- ✓ Cards can be *face-up* or *face-down*.
- ✓ Cards can also be *bowed* (turned sideways) or *unbowed* (vertical). You'll generally bow a card after using abilities or attacking in order to show that you've used it that turn and can't use it again until you've straightened it.
- ✓ Personalities are always either *honorable* or *dishonored*. If they're honorable, they're oriented so you can read them right-side-up. If they're dishonored, though, rotate them 180 degrees so their names face away from you. Dishonored personalities cause honor losses to their controllers equal to their personal honors, and they must be restored to honorable status before any success of theirs once again gains any honor for their controllers.

At the beginning of a game of *L5R*, each player reveals his or her stronghold, wind, and/or sensei. The player with the highest starting family honor — remember, it's the bottom box on the right side of the stronghold — gets to play first. Each player fills each of his or her provinces with a face-down card from the top of his or her dynasty deck and draws a starting hand of five cards from his or her fate deck.

After this, each turn of the game has a specific order of *phases*, some of which are further broken down into *segments*, as follows:

- ✔ **Straighten phase:** This is the shortest phase, and you simply straighten all bowed cards that you control, as well as your stronghold if it's bowed.
- ✔ **Events phase:** First, turn any face-down cards face-up in provinces you control, from left to right. Resolve any event cards that get turned up this way and then move on to the next province. If any region cards are turned up, attach them to the province if possible; discard them if you can't.
- ✔ **Action phase:** During your action phase, you may play any limited or open actions, while during another player's action phase, you may only play open actions. Additionally, there are several other special actions that you can take besides ones on cards you control:
 - You may attach as many followers, items, and spells to your personalities as you can afford.
 - You may bow any cards attached to two or more personalities that you control.
 - You may *lobby for the Imperial Favor* by bowing one of your personalities if you have a higher family honor than your opponent. This comes into use with numerous cards and abilities that involve discarding the Imperial Favor as a cost to play them.
- ✔ **Attack phase:** As with any good combat-based trading card game, this is where most of the fun is! As the name implies, your forces get to duke it out with your opponent's forces in this phase. Not all decks attack often, but ones based around military victories need to attack if they want to win. This phase has several segments:
 - *Declaration segment:* Simply state that you are attacking your opponent or a specific opponent in a multiplayer game. *Battlefields* are now created at each of the defending provinces.
 - *Infantry maneuvers segment:* Choose any number of *units* — personalities along with anything attached to them — led by unbowed personalities to attack any number of opposing provinces. The opponent then does the same with his or her units to defend those provinces.
 - *Cavalry maneuvers segment:* This is the same as the previous segment, except that getting to go after the infantry gives units with the *cavalry* trait the ability to see where infantry units are assigned before they're deployed.
 - *Battle action segment:* This segment takes place for each battlefield. Either player, starting with the defender, may play battle actions or open actions now. These actions must directly involve the contested battlefield and can only be taken by players who are directly participating in the current battle.

- **Resolution segment:** Here's where the battle comes to a head. Now you'll finally figure out who wins and who loses each battle. If a battlefield is undefended, compare the total force of all units — the combined force of all unbowed cards in the attacking army — to the province's strength (remember, it's the top number on the defender's stronghold). If the army's force is has higher number, destroy the province and all cards attached to it.

If both sides have armies there, compare the total forces of each side's army. If the defender's total force is higher, destroy all attacking units; the defender gains family honor equal to twice the number of cards destroyed this way. If the attacker's total force is higher, do the same for the attacker, and if it's also higher than the defender's total force plus the province strength, destroy the province as well. Finally, if both sides have equal total force, destroy all units on both sides at the battlefield; each side then gains honor equal to the number of opposing cards destroyed this way.

After this, return home any remaining attacking units, bowed. Leave any remaining defending units where they are.

- ✓ **Dynasty phase:** Now's your chance to play the personalities and holdings that have been hanging out in your provinces since the events phase. Simply pay the gold cost for any that you wish to play. If you have a personality from your faction, you've got a couple of handy options. You may either reduce the personality's gold cost by 2 when paying for it, or you may pay the full price and gain family honor equal to that personality's personal honor. You may do the latter only once per turn, but it can definitely speed you toward an honor victory! After doing this, you may discard any face-up cards in your provinces and then refill them.
- ✓ **End phase:** Draw a fate card. Then choose and discard cards down to your maximum hand size if you're above it. Now the other player begins his or her turn, continuing until one player achieves victory!



Numerous other special abilities and actions can take place in a game of *Legend of the Five Rings*. One of the most common and important ones is *dueling*. This is how individual personalities can battle each other, and it represents what would happen in Rokugan when one's honor is challenged or insulted. Duels are initiated by actions or other card abilities.

To duel, each player involved places the top three cards of his or her fate deck into a *focus pool* that the opponent can't see and then may add one card from his or her hand. The challenged personality may *focus*, by placing a card from the focus pool face-down, or *strike* to end the focus period. The challenger may then focus or strike. When someone strikes, each controller reveals all of his or her focused cards and adds them to the chi of his or her dueling personality. The one with the higher total chi score wins, and the losing personality

is destroyed. If there's a tie, both personalities are destroyed. To close out the duel, discard all revealed cards and put the rest on the bottom of the fate decks.

Reviewing the Game's Releases

Legend of the Five Rings has had more than 30 releases since its inception more than a decade ago. Rather than just being separate sets, though, most sets from the same era have been woven together thematically in a series of distinct story arcs. The following list describes the various sets:

- ✓ **The Clan Wars:** The first story arc started with the first base set, *Imperial Edition*, in 1995 and culminated two years later at the Gen Con gaming convention's Day of Thunder tournament. It contained the *Imperial*, *Emerald*, and *Obsidian* editions of about 300 cards each, and the *Shadowlands*, *Forbidden Knowledge*, *Anvil of Despair*, *Crimson & Jade*, and *Time of the Void* expansions of about 150 cards each. Several now-defunct clans, such as the snakelike Naga and the monks of the Brotherhood of Shinsei, appeared here but are no longer in current sets. While these — and most other early cards for that matter — are no longer allowed in most tournament formats, this has meant that many early cards can be found for bargain-basement prices if you only want to play with them casually!
- ✓ **Scorpion Clan Coup:** Seizing upon the sneaky, underhanded politics of the Scorpion, this prequel to the Clan Wars focused on the clan's attempt — ultimately unsuccessful — to take over the Rokugani throne. The Scorpion Clan Coup's three sets — *Scroll 1*, *Scroll 2*, and *Scroll 3* — were the first to utilize the rapid-fire Rolling Thunder distribution method, which released small sets of 50 or so cards each month rather than a larger set every three or four months. This proved to be too fast for many players and, combined with numerous collation problems — players received many duplicates even within small numbers of booster packs — the Rolling Thunder system was eventually abandoned.
- ✓ **The Hidden Emperor:** Centered on a story about a mysterious ninja alliance determined to overtake the empire, the Hidden Emperor story arc is set just after *Clan Wars* and spans nearly three real-world years' worth of expansions until the summer of 2000. It encompassed the six Rolling Thunder–released *Hidden Emperor* episode sets, the *Jade* and *Pearl* editions, and the *Honor Bound*, *Ambition's Debt*, *Fire & Shadow*, and *Soul of the Empire* expansions. The *Heroes of Rokugan* boxed set also came out during this period and, because it was available only to *L5R*'s Imperial Assembly fan club members, contained many of the game's most expensive and highly sought-after cards, even though it had just 27 cards in it.

- ✓ **The Four Winds:** The focus of this storyline was the succession to the Rokugani throne of the emperor Toturi III's children and the battles among them. Kicked off by *Heroes of Rokugan* and *The Spirit Wars* — which also contained the old Spirit faction — The Four Winds contained *Gold Edition* plus *A Perfect Cut*, *An Oni's Fury*, *Dark Allies*, *Broken Blades*, *The Fall of Otosan Uchi*, *Heaven & Earth*, and *Winds of Change* expansions. The alternate-history *1,000 Years of Darkness* boxed set, which plotted out what would have happened if the Shadowlands had triumphed during the Clan Wars story arc, was also made available to fan club members during this time.
- ✓ **The Bloodspeaker Saga:** This started with *Diamond Edition* and told the story of the sorcerer Iuchiban. It contained the last few Four Winds sets as well as the *Reign of Blood*, *The Hidden City*, *Wrath of the Emperor*, *Web of Lies*, *Enemy of My Enemy*, and *Code of Bushido* sets.
- ✓ **Lotus Edition:** Still a work in progress, this set began in the fall of 2005 with the *Lotus Edition* set. It was originally designed before that summer's world championships at Gen Con with two outcomes in mind. If the Shadowlands had won, the set would have been called *Dark Lotus Edition*, future sets would have been affected similarly, and the enlightenment win condition would have been eliminated. Because the Crane Clan won, we got plain old *Lotus Edition* along with its follow-up expansion, *Path of Honor*. More *Lotus Edition*-related sets will follow in 2006 and 2007. Additionally, Imperial Assembly members were able to buy the limited-edition *Dawn of the Empire* boxed set, which harkened back to Rokugan's early days.

Building a Basic Deck

Legend of the Five Rings has a ton of stuff going on in it, so in an effort to keep you from getting too overwhelmed, I show you what a basic deck should look like. Starter decks are playable straight out of the box, but because they have both fixed and random sections, you're going to get a number of off-clan (cards from a different clan than your stronghold) and other suboptimal cards in any given deck. In the following sections, you take a look at a Lion Clan deck because its focus on small, speedy personalities is a pretty easy concept to grasp. You'll want to save more complex strategies — especially those of the Shadowlands, who play by different rules than the other factions — until after you've gotten at least a few games under your belt.

When building a deck, you want to stick as closely to 40 cards as possible in each of your two decks. You can play with up to three copies of most cards, but just one of any card that has the unique trait.

Your main objective with this Lion Clan deck is to bust out as many personalities as you can, swarming opposing forces and overwhelming them so you can defeat opposing provinces and achieve a military victory. To start with, you'll be playing with the stronghold **Shiro no Yojin** (refer to Figure 7-1), with its province strength of 7, gold production of 3, and a starting family honor of 6. More important, though, is its ability to produce 2 more gold when paying for your followers and items. Plus, it lets you immediately attach either the followers or the items from your hand to any of your samurai when you bring the samurai into play, also at a cost of 2 less than their printed gold costs.

You also make use of the wind card **Right Hand of the Emperor**, which allows you to discard the Imperial Favor to move a unit you control to a contested battlefield. It's got another great ability as well: It allows you once per turn to put nonpersonality cards in your provinces on the bottom of your deck and refill those provinces. This lets you cycle in more personalities over the course of the game and enables you to increase your army's size more quickly.

The dynasty deck: Marshaling the troops

For this example, you limit your dynasty deck to just holdings and personalities; you don't need any events slowing you down when you could be beefing up your forces! For holdings, you have the following:

- ✓ 3 copies of **Barley Farm**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Copper Mine**
- ✓ 2 copies of **Crystal Mine**
- ✓ 2 copies of **Gifts and Favors**
- ✓ 2 copies of **Large Farm**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Secluded Waystation**

Most holdings that cost 2 gold to play will also produce 2 gold and will have an additional ability that fits a particular deck type. **Barley Farm** produces 2 gold, but it's split up among two separate abilities, so you can use the gold when paying for two separate costs; normally, any extra gold produced by an ability would otherwise be lost and unable to be used on other costs.

Copper Mine, shown in Figure 7-7, also produces 2 gold, but it can also generate 3 gold for a Lion player, so it's an automatic “three-of” in this deck — you'll definitely want three of them. **Secluded Waystation** is the other three-copy holding. It starts off producing 2 gold, but that number increases by 1 each time you use it.



Figure 7-7:
Copper Mine's special ability is a boon to any Lion Clan player.

Crystal Mine doesn't produce any gold by itself, but it lets you bow it and another gold-producing holding to produce 6 gold, a nice boost over the average of 4. **Large Farm** has no special abilities but gives you 2 gold for a cost of just 1. And **Gifts and Favors** has a unique ability; it gives you 2 gold for a cost of 2, but if you've played no gold-producing holdings on a given turn, you may bow your stronghold to search your dynasty deck and face-down provinces for a copy of it and then put it directly into play, bowed.

Now that you've got all these ways to make gold, you're gonna need cards to spend them on. Fortunately, you've got these 25 personality cards in your dynasty deck to do just that:

- ✓ 3 copies of **Akodo Anshiro**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Akodo Ieshige**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Akodo Natsu**

- ✓ 3 copies of **Ikoma Kosaku**
- ✓ 1 copy of **Ikoma Otemi** (Experienced 2)
- ✓ 3 copies of **Matsu Agoro**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Matsu Hyun**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Matsu Miyahara**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Matsu Takenao**

Akodo Anshiro is a 2F/3C — 2 force and 3 chi — for 7 gold and has both the *duelist* and *tactician* traits. Being a duelist allows him to focus first in a duel, while being a tactician — a common trait among your army and among Lions in general — offers a couple of great abilities. First, tacticians are the only personalities that can play *tactical actions*. Even better, you can raise a tactician's force value as many times as you want to per turn by discarding a card from your hand and adding its focus value to the tactician's force.

Akodo Ieshige gives you 3F/4C for 7 gold, plus he gains 1 force each time an opponent plays an action during a battle. **Akodo Natsu** is 1F/3C for 7 gold and lets you draw a card any time you play a special type of battlefield-affecting action card called a *terrain*. And **Ikoma Kosaku** is a 3F/4C tactician for 8 gold who can make your personalities cheaper to play.

The Matsu family provides you with most of your minor personalities. **Matsu Agoro** is a 2F/2C samurai for 4 gold with the fear ability, which bows all opposing followers in one unit sharing the same battlefield with him if they have a force less than or equal to his fear value of 3. **Matsu Hyun** is a 2F/3C samurai for 4 gold and can bow at any time to straighten any of your tacticians.

Matsu Miyahara starts out at just 1F/3C for 5 gold, but she gets +1F for each Lion Clan samurai in her army and can become quite menacing. And **Matsu Takenao**, a 4F/4C samurai for 7 gold, can reduce his chi by 2 to increase another personality's force by 2 while attacking for the rest of the game.

Finally, your big gun is the unique **Ikoma Otemi**. His Experienced 2 trait allows you to play him on top of another copy of his Non-Experienced (or an Experienced 1) version, or *overlay* him, but in this case, he simply provides you with a huge body to send into battle. In addition to being a large 8F/5C samurai for 11 gold, he has the cavalry and tactician traits. **Ikoma Otemi** also lets you discard your hand during the battle action segment to draw either five cards or a number of cards equal to the number of units in his army, whichever is greater.

In case you're wondering, the reason that these personalities all have similar first names is that the Japanese (and Rokugani) place their family name first. The personalities are actually all members of the Akodo, Ikoma, and Matsu families.



The fate deck: Taking action

Now that you've stocked your dynasty deck, it's time to check out the fate deck. First off is the deck's one unique item, the Lion Clan sword **Daitan**. For 6 gold, it gives its equipped personality a +4F bonus and raises his or her chi to 5 if it was lower than that. **Daitan** can also bow during a battle to create a 2F/1C Lion Clan personality *token* with a personal honor of 2. This token acts just like a regular personality, except it gets removed from the game if it ever leaves play.

Next up are your followers, which allow your personalities to become stronger in battle:

- ✓ 3 copies of **Ashigaru Archers**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Ashigaru Spearmen**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Disciplined Infantry**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Lion's Pride**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Omoidasu**

The **Ashigaru Archers** let you replace them immediately after playing them — a neat trick to have in your arsenal. They also have a battle action that lets you bow them to target an opposing follower — or personality with no followers — with a *ranged attack* of 2. This means that the target is destroyed if its force is 2 or less. The **Ashigaru Spearmen** are similar, except they have a force bonus of 1 instead of the **Ashigaru Archers'** 0 and have a ranged attack of 1 instead of 2.

Disciplined Infantry cards provide a +2F bonus, plus they get an additional +1F if you control a special type of action card called a *formation*. **Lion's Pride** can attach only to a tactician, but it gives a whopping force bonus of 4 for just 5 gold, an outstanding deal. And **Omoidasu** would normally cost 4 gold for its 2 force bonus, but it's 1 gold cheaper to attach to Lion personalities. After the attached personality wins a duel or battle or destroys a province, you can also bow **Omoidasu** to either gain 2 honor or give the personality a permanent +1F bonus.

Filling out the majority (and remainder) of your fate deck are the following actions:

- ✓ 3 copies of **Battlefield of Shallow Graves**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Heart of Rokugan**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Outmaneuvered by Tactics**

- ✓ 3 copies of **Overwhelmed**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Peasant Vengeance**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Rain of Death**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Refugees**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Three-Stone River**

Battlefield of Shallow Graves is a terrain that enables you to halve the force of enemy personalities in a battle, while **Heart of Rokugan** lets you boost your *human* followers — all of your followers in this particular deck — by +1F while knocking down all nonhuman followers by -1F.

Outmaneuvered by Tactics gives your tacticians yet another bonus — it's a tactical action, so only tacticians can play it — that gives you two 2F/1C tokens during a battle. **Overwhelmed** gives your opponent a tough decision during combat; either he or she moves two units home or destroys his or her highest-force personality. And **Peasant Vengeance** destroys an opposing personality with no followers or items.

Rain of Death is a formation that requires you to control two tacticians, but it's worth it. First, it gives two ranged 3 attacks to one of your tacticians. And second, it lets you destroy one of your tacticians to destroy two opposing cards with no unbowed cards attached.

Refugees gives you a convenient way during battle to send home a personality with no followers. Finally, **Three-Stone River** is a terrain with a nifty trick. During a battle, it reduces the force of each personality to the force of its highest-force followers, or to 1 if it's got no followers. This works out great for you because you'll often have some decent followers, but will neutralize follower-light decks.

Exploring New Combinations of Strength and Defense

All of the cards that I describe in the previous section should be easy for you to get a hold of because none of them are rare and they're all available in the *Lotus Edition* base set. A number of them can be found in the *Lotus Edition Lion Clan* starter deck, and you should be able to pick up the rest in booster packs or at your local game store.

Of course, adding some rare cards and cards from other expansions gives you the ability to do even more with your deck. With a Lion Clan deck, such as the previous one, you could consider adding some other potent Lion personalities, like the *Code of Bushido* expansion's **Akodo Shigetoshi**, who lets you draw an extra card each time you attach a follower to him, or **Ikoma Chikao**, who makes each of your Lion Clan personalities cheaper to play and attaches a free 1F follower token to any new Lion that you play.

Akodo Bakin, shown in Figure 7-8, is another powerful rare Lion from *Code of Bushido*. He gives you a 3F/2C samurai tactician for 7 gold and has a personal honor of 3, and his tactical battle action's a doozie. He lets you bow three Lion personalities at a battlefield to directly destroy an entire opposing unit before even resolving the battle.



Figure 7-8:
Akodo Bakin's
powerful
battle action
can take
over any
battlefield.

Lotus Edition adds some rare cards of its own that can be useful in such a deck as well. **Akodo Kobi** lets you bring a personality into play for free from one of your provinces for the duration of one battle. And **Matsu Taniko** lets you draw a card each time you resolve one of your tactical actions.

And that's just part of the Lion Clan from the last two sets. Multiply that by 10 factions and throw in the 600-plus cards just from those two sets and the hundreds of cards from the last few sets and you'll get an idea of how many different ways you can build a *Lotus Edition* deck. And if you go all the way back to *Imperial Edition*, there are so many ways to put together a deck that it's impossible to count them!

Connecting with Your Fellow Adherents

With such a dedicated player and fan base, it should be no surprise that there are tons of places to find information and broaden your knowledge about *Legend of the Five Rings*. Here are a few ways to expand your enlightenment about the game:

- ✔ While casual play is fun and lets you play with any cards you want to, tournaments are a great way to find tons of other players. Not only do they offer some cool prizes, like promotional cards, artwork, and even collector's-edition swords, but many of them also allow you to directly influence the game's storyline. Special tournaments called *Kotei* serve to determine regional champions and qualifiers who go on to face off at the annual *L5R* world championships at Gen Con in Indianapolis each summer.
- ✔ Alderac Entertainment Group's official *L5R* Web site (<http://15r.alderac.com>) is also a great place to find out information regarding upcoming tournaments and clan lore. Additionally, you can often see sneak peeks at new sets and can find cool stuff like *L5R* computer wallpaper.
- ✔ If you need to research specific cards for deck building, check out www.15rsearch.com. It lets you search by clan, card type, edition, and numerous other criteria and hosts every card in the game. You'll find stats on every card as well as images of many of them.
- ✔ Also, 15r.shorturl.com is a fun fan site. It has storyline background info, checklists for every *L5R* set, and even a page of "Easter eggs" hidden in card artwork and elsewhere in the game.

Chapter 8

Dueling with Monsters and Magic in Yu-Gi-Oh!

In This Chapter

- ▶ *Yu-Gi-Oh!* Yeah! Why people love the game so much
 - ▶ Distinguishing each of *Yu-Gi-Oh!*'s card types
 - ▶ Charging into battle
 - ▶ Poring through the many *Yu-Gi-Oh!* sets
 - ▶ Assembling your first forces
 - ▶ Tricking out a killer deck
 - ▶ Tracking down other duelists
-

You'd never think just by looking at him that a spiky-haired kid would be able to tame powerful dragons and mighty warriors. But that's exactly what Yugi Mutou does as the main character of the wildly popular *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cartoon.

And like the show, the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* trading card game gives you an opportunity to slide into Yugi's shoes and play the part of the mastermind who aims to be the best duelist in the land, taking on all comers.

Sure, you're not playing a superhero, a wizard, or even a multitalented sports all-star, but what you don't have in raw abilities in *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, you make up for by sporting a keen mind for sending armies into battle and using your resources to defeat your foes. In this chapter, you see exactly what has made the game such a smashing success for the past few years — and likely for years to come.

Watching the Show, Learning the Game

More than any other trading card game property, *Yu-Gi-Oh!* sports a direct tie with the show itself. Not only do Yugi, Kaiba, Pegasus, and the other characters face off against monsters and spells, they use gaming cards to do it! This has made the game very accessible to those who watch the show because parts of the show actually illustrate — dramatically, of course — what can happen in a typical game.

For lots of fans, the card game simply gives them a way to collect their favorite monsters from the show. We're going to dig a bit deeper here, though, and give you the ins and outs of what a real game of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* actually feels like. Not only are you going to see how to summon huge forces and cast magical spells, but you'll also get a glimpse into how to dig through the thousands of existing cards to assemble your own unique decks.

In a *Yu-Gi-Oh!* game, you play the part of a duelist who controls these magical cards. Each player starts the game — known in *Yu-Gi-Oh!* as a *duel* — with 8,000 life points. The first one to successfully reduce the opponent to 0 life points wins the duel, and the first player to win two games out of three wins the match! (You can also win if your opponent can't draw a card when he or she is required to, or through the effects of some specific cards in the game.)

Looking through the Cards

You encounter three main types of cards in *Yu-Gi-Oh!* — Monsters, Spells, and Traps. Each type has specific, distinct rules and stats that dictate its use in the game.

Monsters: Your chief offense and defense

When you're duking it out with your opponent in a duel, you're going to need a lot of monsters at your disposal. They're the ones who attack your opponent and prevent most of the damage from incoming attacks. Many of them also have some really cool special abilities. There are a lot of numbers and symbols on a Monster card, so here's how to read one:

- ✓ **Attributes:** In addition to its name at the top, each card has a circular emblem on the right. This is the card's *attribute*, which represents the basic force guiding the card. There are six attributes in the game: Earth,

Water, Fire, Wind, Light, and Dark. On its own, the attribute doesn't do anything, but many cards have abilities that affect other cards of a certain attribute. **Dark Blade**, shown here in Figure 8-1, has Dark as its attribute.



Figure 8-1: **Dark Blade** knows just one thing — battling — but he knows it well.

- ✓ **Type:** The *type* of monster you have is displayed in the box directly below the monster's picture. (Refer to Figure 8-1 to see **Dark Blade's** type.) The type shows what sort of being the monster is and, like attributes, is used to key off other cards' effects. There are 20 different card types, from gigantic dragons to insidious insects to animated rocks and machines.
- ✓ **Level:** Going back up to the top right of the card, you'll discover a series of star icons just below the attribute. These represent the card's *level* — in **Dark Blade's** case, it's 4. The stronger a monster's abilities are, the higher its level will normally be. More powerful monsters require you to pay certain extra costs when you play them; I get to that in a little bit.
- ✓ **Stats:** In the bottom-right corner of a monster card are that card's attack (ATK) and defense (DEF) stats. The higher the stats, the more powerful that monster is in combat and the tougher it is to defeat. **Dark Blade's** ATK is 1,800 and his DEF is 1,500; these are decent numbers for a level-4 warrior when compared with others in the game.

- ✓ **Text:** It turns out that **Dark Blade** has no other abilities and for that reason is called a *normal monster*; the text below his picture is simply there for flavor. (The clue that **Dark Blade** is a normal monster lies in the yellow background in this text box.) Some monsters, like **Command Knight**, seen in Figure 8-2, have game-related text. In addition to being protected from attacks when another monster is on your side, **Command Knight** boosts the ATK of your other monsters, making them fiercer in battle. Monsters with special abilities like this are called *effect monsters*, and their text boxes have orange backgrounds.



Figure 8-2: Command Knight is hard to hit and also pumps up your other warriors.

Yu-Gi-Oh! has two other chief types of monsters — *fusion* and *ritual* monsters — that appear less frequently than the previously mentioned normal and effect monsters. Fusion monsters use a card called **Polymerization** to combine two other monsters in play into one bigger one. While you lose a net of one monster this way, you're able to pick the fusion monster directly out of a special pile called the *fusion deck* rather than having to wait for it to come up randomly in your regular deck. Fusion monster cards all have a purple background.

Ritual monster cards have a blue background. They work similarly to fusion monsters, except that ritual monsters go in your regular deck. Instead of using **Polymerization**, each one has its own unique ritual spell card and requires that you have another specific monster that you must lose from play when you play the ritual monster.

Certain special kinds of monsters called *token monsters* don't have cards; rather, they're put into play through effects of other cards and are represented by tokens. They simply get removed from the game when they leave play.

- ✔ **Identifying numbers:** In addition to all of these stats and symbols, a couple of other numbers appear on monster cards, as well as all other *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards. On the right side of the card are some letters and numbers. The ones that appear before the hyphen denote the set from which the card comes; each set has its own unique identifier. On the right is the card's serial number, which identifies the card within that set.
- ✔ **Video game tie-ins:** Finally, on the bottom left of the card is a string of eight numbers. They don't affect the trading card game, but you can enter these numbers into many *Yu-Gi-Oh!* video games to unlock special powers.



Many *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards have some degree of shininess to them. Generally, the more foil you see, the rarer the card is. *Common* cards have no foil, while *rare* cards, which appear about once per nine-card booster pack, have a foiled name. *Super-rare* cards have a plain name but a foil picture, while *ultra-rare* cards have both a gold foil name and a foil picture. *Secret rare* cards have a funky striped effect to their foil pictures, while *ultimate rares* are even cooler, with a three-dimensional relief effect.

These rarities have no direct effect on gameplay, but some of the rarer cards appear only once per booster box — or even less frequently — making them very tough to get your hands on. Cards with the “first edition” designation come from the beginning of a set's print run and are even harder to find. Consequently, some of them go for a ton of money — ultimate rares regularly go for more than \$50!

Spells: The magic that makes you mightier

Sometimes you need to do more than tussle with monsters if you want to make any headway against your opponent. Spells are a crucial part of doing that because many of them have surprise effects that you can't achieve with monsters alone.



Before the *Magician's Force* expansion, Spell cards were known as *Magic cards*. If you have any of these, play them as if they say “Spell card” on them.

Spell cards, with their light green backgrounds, have a simpler layout than Monster cards. Many of them have just the card's name on top and their ability in the text box. You simply play these *Normal* spell cards, do what they say, and then discard them. **Heavy Storm**, shown in Figure 8-3, is one such spell; it destroys all spells and traps and then goes away.



Figure 8-3:
Heavy Storm is an all-purpose answer to threatening spells and traps.

A few subtypes of Spell cards have slightly different rules that apply to them, though. Here's the rundown:

- ✓ *Continuous* spell cards stay on the board after you use them. They affect the field of play until they're removed. These have an infinity symbol in the top-right corner.
- ✓ *Equip* spell cards grant abilities or change the attack and/or defense stats of creatures that they equip. They stay in play until they or the equipped monster are removed from play, and they're denoted by a cross symbol.
- ✓ *Field* spell cards modify the entire board and often have powerful effects. Only one total can be played, even between both players; any new one introduced into play destroys a previously played one. Field spell cards have a four-pointed star symbol.
- ✓ *Quick-Play* spell cards can be played at any time on your turn, unlike others that are normally limited to certain phases of the turn. They have a lightning-bolt symbol.
- ✓ *Ritual* spell cards allow you to bring a ritual monster into play; they sport a flaming torch symbol.

Traps: Your sneaky surprises

Trap cards perform many of the same tasks that Spell cards do, except they're governed by slightly different timing rules. (They come with a purple background, which makes them stand out easily from the other card types.) Watch for these trap cards:

- ✓ *Normal* traps are simply *set* (played face-down on the field) and then can be *activated* (turned face-up) at any time after the start of the next turn. They're then discarded from play.
- ✓ *Counter* traps nullify the summoning of monsters or the effects of other spells or traps; they have an arrow symbol in the top-right corner. **Magic Jammer**, shown in Figure 8-4, is one such trap that counters a spell and destroys it. Counter traps also go away after they're used.
- ✓ *Continuous* traps stay around after activation and, like continuous spells, affect the field until they're removed from play. They are marked with an infinity symbol in the top-right corner.



Figure 8-4:
Magic Jammer
stops spells
right in their
tracks.

En Garde! Watching a Typical Duel

Before getting into gameplay, you need to know a few basics about the field of play:

- ✔ Your *deck* is the pile from which you draw cards. It must contain at least 40 cards. It's kept face-down and normally can't be seen face-up by either player. In tournaments, you can also have a *side deck* that gives you cards that can be switched in and out between duels, plus a *fusion deck* to hold your fusion monsters.
- ✔ The *graveyard* is where all destroyed monsters and used spells and traps go. These cards are kept face-up in one pile and may be examined at any time.
- ✔ Your *monster zone* holds — surprise! — your monsters in play. It has a limit of five monsters, meaning that you can't play any new ones if the zone's full.
- ✔ Similarly, your *spell and trap zone* holds up to five total of those card types. A single-card *field zone* holds a field spell.

You can have just one field card total in play between both players.



Each turn of the game has a specific order in which you can perform game actions, such as playing cards, attacking, or activating effects. When the game starts, you first shuffle your deck and draw five cards. Then, flip a coin or roll a die to randomly determine who plays first. After that, the game proceeds in turn order. Here's how a typical turn looks:

- ✔ **Draw phase:** At the beginning of your turn, draw a card from your deck. (Keep in mind that if you can't draw a card, you lose the game.)
- ✔ **Standby phase:** Some cards have a cost to maintain them while in play or have some other specified action. This is normally when you pay that cost or take that action.
- ✔ **Main phase 1:** This is the phase when you get to play your cards to the field. Each card type is played in certain ways:
 - **Monster cards:** You may *normal summon* a Monster card by playing it from your hand face-up and oriented vertically in *attack position*, or *set* the card by placing it face-down and horizontal in *defense position*. You are limited to one normal summon per turn.

If you have a monster of level 5 or 6, you must perform a *tribute summon* by placing one of your monsters already in play into your graveyard. Monsters of level 7 or higher require a tribute of two monsters.



You can also *flip summon* a face-down monster by turning it face-up and vertical. You may do this only once per turn per monster, but you can flip summon as many monsters as you have available, and it doesn't affect your normal summon count for the turn.

Additionally, you may also summon a fusion or ritual monster or put a monster into play if a card in play says you can. This also doesn't count against your normal summons limit. These, as well as similar non-normal summons, are collectively known as *special summons*.

- **Spell and Trap cards:** You may play as many Spell and Trap cards as you have spaces for on the field — up to your five total. Spells may be activated (played face-up) or set (played face-down), while traps must always be set. Activated spells immediately generate their effects.
- ✔ **Battle phase:** Ah, the moment of truth! When it's your turn, you may attack an opponent's monster — except that the player who plays first must skip the battle phase on his or her first turn. In preparing for an attack, both you and your opponent may first play any Quick-Play spells and/or traps you have at the ready; you then announce which of your attack-position monsters is attacking and which opposing one it's targeting. After playing any additional Quick-Plays, calculate the damage each monster does to the other according to the following rules:
- **If the defending monster is in attack position,** you'll compare the attacker's ATK to that of the defender. If the attacker's ATK is greater than the defender's, *destroy* the defender — put it into the graveyard — and subtract the difference from the opposing duelist's life total. (Remember, each player starts with a life total of 8,000.) If the ATK numbers are equal, destroy both monsters. If the defender's ATK is higher, destroy the attacker and deduct the difference from your life total.
 - **If the defending monster is in defense position,** flip it face-up and then compare the attacker's ATK to the defender's DEF. If the attacker is higher, destroy the defending monster but don't subtract the difference from the opponent's life total. If they're equal, nothing happens. If the defender is higher, the attacker sticks around, but you take damage equal to the difference between your monster's ATK and your opponent's monster's DEF — where "taking damage" means deducting the difference from your life total. (Ouch!)
 - **If there are no opposing monsters to attack,** you may attack the opponent directly. Simply attack with a monster and then subtract its ATK from your opponent's life total.

You may attack once per turn with each monster. Again, if at any time you've reduced your opponent to 0 or fewer life points, you win!

- ✔ **Main phase 2:** You may perform any of the same actions that you could do in main phase 1. You're still restricted to one normal summon total per turn, as well as one change of position — from attack to defense — per monster per turn.
- ✔ **End phase:** Finally, you end your turn. Discard from your hand until you're holding six cards and then pass the turn to your opponent. He or she now begins the turn in the draw phase. Repeat all of the previous phases each turn until one player wins!

Sifting among Set after Set of Cards

Yu-Gi-Oh! has been on American store shelves for about four years now, but Upper Deck — the official licensee of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* in the United States — continues to put out expansions for the game at a blistering pace unseen in any other trading card game. Because Konami — the game's original producer — released the game in Japan several years earlier than the stateside version, we've been playing catch-up, with most of the early American sets encompassing two of Konami's Japanese ones in order to eventually bring them up to similar release schedules.

We've reached that point now, but in the meantime, about 20 sets totaling thousands of cards have come down the pike. Additionally, numerous pre-constructed decks, promotional card inserts, tournament prize cards, and other nonstandard releases have appeared. Here's a quick look at the major sets so far:

- ✔ **Legend of Blue-Eyes White Dragon** kicked off the English-language translation of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* with strong spellcaster **Dark Magician**, several huge dragons, and many overpowered Spell and Trap cards, like **Raigeki**, which destroys all of your opponent's monsters while leaving your own untouched. It also contains **Exodia the Forbidden One**, plus one card each for his arms and legs; getting all five of these into your hand at the same time wins you the game.
- ✔ **Metal Raiders** followed up with the attacker-destroying trap **Mirror Force** and secret rare **Gate Guardian**, who has a whopping 3,750 ATK and 3,400 DEF.
- ✔ **Magic Ruler**, the third set, explores the alternate Toon World with the wacky **Toon Mermaid**, **Toon Summoned Skull**, and **Manga Ryu-Ran**, as well as **Blue-Eyes Toon Dragon**, the alternate version of chief dragon **Blue-Eyes White Dragon**.

- ✓ *Pharaoh's Servant* features **Jinzo**, a machine that stops all traps from working, and **Buster Blader**, a warrior who gets pumped up if you have lots of dragons on the board.
- ✓ *Labyrinth of Nightmare* contains **United We Stand**, an Equip spell that boosts monsters to obscene stats, and **Destiny Board**, a new alternate-win trap card that scores you the game if you get each of its four spirit messages into play at the same time.
- ✓ *Legacy of Darkness's* secret rare fiend/spirit **Yata-Garasu** owned tournaments for a long time with its ability to force an opponent to skip his or her next draw phase each time it dealt damage to the opponent.
- ✓ *Pharaonic Guardian's* trap **Ring of Destruction** destroys any face-up monster on the board while dealing damage equal to its ATK to both players.
- ✓ *Magician's Force* contains numerous big-ticket cards, including the popular **Dark Magician Girl**, a level-6 2,000 ATK/1,700 DEF spellcaster who gets a boost from each Dark Magician you have in play or in your graveyard.
- ✓ *Dark Crisis* brought forth **Exodia Necross**, who requires all five **Exodia** parts in your graveyard for its power to be unleashed but is also indestructible and grows in ATK each turn.
- ✓ *Invasion of Chaos* contains the secret rare **Chaos Emperor Dragon**, who can rid the board and both players' hands of all cards if you pay 1,000 life points, and ultra-rare **Black Luster Soldier**, who can either pick off one opposing monster each turn or attack an extra time each turn if he defeats an opposing monster in battle.
- ✓ *Ancient Sanctuary's* **Enemy Controller** lets you either change the battle position of an opposing monster or tribute one of your own monsters to steal an opposing one for a turn.
- ✓ *Soul of the Duelist* features several different levels of **Horus the Black Flame Dragon**; the level-8 one — the biggest of the bunch — negates and destroys all Spell cards on the field.
- ✓ *Dark Beginning 1* (followed several months later by *Dark Beginning 2*) reprinted many popular earlier cards, giving newer players a chance to grab powerful ones at a cheaper price.
- ✓ *Rise of Destiny* features **The Creator**, a huge thunder monster who lets you discard a card each turn to special summon a monster from your graveyard.
- ✓ *Flaming Eternity* showcases **Sacred Phoenix of Nephthys**, a winged beast who can come back each turn after being destroyed by a card effect and then destroy all spells and traps on the field.

- ✓ **Dark Revelation 1** is *Yu-Gi-Oh!*'s second reprint set, focusing on dark, light, and earth monsters. **Dark Revelation 2** has followed in its wake.
- ✓ **The Lost Millennium's Ancient Gear Golem** can deal damage through defense-position monsters as if they were in attack position, negating any opposing spells and traps during the attack. **Reshef the Dark Being**, meanwhile, has the brutal ability to gain control of an opposing monster each turn.
- ✓ **Cybernetic Revolution's Cyber End Dragon** requires the tribute of three **Cyber Dragon** monsters, but in return brings to the field a 4,000 ATK/2,800 DEF behemoth that can plow straight through defense-position monsters and deal tons of damage.

Additionally, several tournament prize kits have been released to game stores for use in local leagues over the last few years, each set containing 15 to 30 cards. Also, many *Yu-Gi-Oh!* video games contain special promotional cards that aren't available elsewhere. And some big tournaments, such as the Shonen Jump championships, award super-duper rare cards to winners. The first one, **Cyber-Stein**, went to a player who bested several hundred opponents; it later sold for several thousand dollars!

Creating a Starting Deck

In tandem with a number of its sets, Upper Deck has released preconstructed *structure decks* to enable new players to start playing *Yu-Gi-Oh!* without having to accumulate tons of rare cards through booster packs. They generally run \$10 to \$15 and contain a playable 40-card deck, usually themed around a certain monster or type of monster.

While these decks are able to be cracked open and played right from the get-go, they're also meant to expose players to a number of new cards. As such, they contain lots of different cards, rather than a more focused build containing three copies — the maximum number you can legally play of a given card — of the most powerful cards.

In this section, you take a look at how to bring more power cheaply to the recent *Warrior's Triumph* structure deck, which contains all of the cards I mention earlier in the “Looking through the Cards” section. As the name implies, it's centered on warrior-type monsters and can pack quite a punch. Also, most of these have the earth attribute. (Not sure what all this talk of attributes and types means? Then flip back to the aforementioned “Looking through the Cards” section.)

Nearly all the monsters in this deck are level 4 or lower, meaning they can be normal summoned without requiring a tribute. If you want to add *speed* to the deck — play more monsters more quickly and swarm your opponent with them before he can set up his defenses — remove the three higher-level monsters — **Gilford the Legend**, **Swift Gaia the Fierce Knight**, and **Gearfried the Swordmaster** — in order to make room for cheaper monsters and more ways to increase their damage-dealing capabilities.

You also want to keep the remaining monsters as independent of one another and of other cards as possible and then bump up the strongest ones to three copies each. After doing that, you can tweak the number of Spell and Trap cards in your deck to fit better with the monsters you have left.

A focused build of the deck can look like this:

Monsters

- ✓ 3 copies of **Command Knight**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Dark Blade**
- ✓ 3 copies of **D.D. Warrior Lady**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Exiled Force**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Marauding Captain**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Mataza the Zapper**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Obnoxious Celtic Guard**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Warrior Lady of the Wasteland**

Dark Blade provides you with your biggest natural attacker, beating out the deck's **Gearfried the Iron Knight** because, unlike **Gearfried**, it doesn't destroy any equipment on it. **D.D. Warrior Lady** and **Exiled Force** enable you to directly destroy opposing monsters no matter how big they are, which will come in handy when clearing the way so that your attacker can deal as much damage as quickly as possible.

Obnoxious Celtic Guard battles well with bigger monsters; equip him and he'll be able to take down even the fiercest of opponents. **Mataza** also holds equipment well; he can attack twice per turn, doubling the equipment's damage potential, and can't be stolen while he's face-up.

Warrior Lady of the Wasteland and **Marauding Captain** give you ways to bring additional monsters into play for free, helping you swarm your opponent before he or she can set up defenses. **Marauding Captain** also keeps your warriors from being targeted by attacks. Finally, **D.D. Warrior Lady**, seen in Figure 8-5, lets you remove an opponent's monster after damage calculation.

Figure 8-5:
D. D. Warrior Lady lets you neutralize even the biggest of your opponent's monsters.



Spells

- ✓ 3 copies of **Fusion Sword Murasame Blade**
- ✓ 2 copies of **Giant Trunade**
- ✓ 1 copy of **Heavy Storm**
- ✓ 3 copies of **Lightning Blade**
- ✓ 1 copy of **Lightning Vortex**
- ✓ 1 copy of **Mystical Space Typhoon**
- ✓ 2 copies of **Reinforcement of the Army**
- ✓ 1 copy of **Snatch Steal**

Fusion Sword and **Lightning Blade** each provide a huge 800-point ATK boost to whomever they equip; additionally, **Fusion Sword** can't be destroyed by spell destruction, and **Lightning Blade** decreases the ATK of water monsters by 500. And to help you find more warriors, **Reinforcement of the Army** grabs any of yours from your deck and puts it into your hand.

This deck also includes some general utility spells: **Giant Trunade** bounces all spells and traps on the field to their owners' hands. **Heavy Storm** nukes all spells and traps on the table, while **Lightning Vortex** destroys all opposing face-up monsters in exchange for a discard of one measly card. **Mystical Space Typhoon** picks off one specific spell or trap card, and **Snatch Steal** gives you permanent control of an enemy monster.



Heavy Storm, Lightning Vortex, Mystical Space Typhoon, and Snatch Steal pack quite a punch, which is why you're limited to just one copy per deck if you want to play in the most popular format, Advanced.

Traps

- ✓ 1 copy of **Call of the Haunted**
- ✓ 1 copy of **Magic Jammer**

The restricted **Call of the Haunted** — restricted in that you can play with one copy in your deck — special summons any of your monsters from your graveyard straight into play. **Magic Jammer** gives you a way to negate and destroy a spell card.

Combining Cards for Better Wins

With thousands of cards to choose from, the possibilities are endless as far as extending a deck such as the one I discuss in the previous sections. For a warrior deck, like that one, you have a few recent options like *Dark Beginning 2's* ultra-rare **Blade Knight**, who starts as a level-4 1,660 ATK/1,000 DEF monster, but who gets a 400-point ATK pump if you have fewer than two cards in your hand — enough to clear out just about any other level-4 monster!

Dark Beginning 2 also provides **Dream Clown**, who directly destroys a monster simply by flipping **Dream Clown** from attack position to defense position. Also, if you think you're going to face a lot of spells and traps, go for the warrior **Princess of Tsurugi**. She flips to deal 500 damage to your opponent for each spell and trap your opponent controls.

Another cool addition to the deck comes from the recent 2005 holiday tin collector's edition set. **Gilford the Lightning**, shown in Figure 8-6, is a level-8 2,800 ATK/1,400 DEF who lets you tribute summon him by tributing three monsters. Some bargain? You betcha — when you summon him this way, he destroys all of your opponent's monsters!



Additionally, most of the restricted spells are worth taking a look at for this or any other *Yu-Gi-Oh!* deck. They're restricted for a reason — their game-breaking powers — so if you don't mind shelling out some dough for the more expensive rare ones, you'll have a bigger arsenal of weapons at your disposal, too. I show you where to find the restricted list shortly.

Finding, Meeting, and Challenging Other Duelists

Finding other people to play *Yu-Gi-Oh!* with shouldn't be too hard as long as you don't live in the middle of nowhere. In addition to tournaments at the summer game conventions, many hobby game shops run tournaments once or more per week, some with exclusive card prizes, others with cash or store credit prizes. To find a list of stores and tournaments in your area, check out Upper Deck's official *Yu-Gi-Oh!* Web site at www.yugioh-card.com.

You can also find a lot of other game resources at that site, including the tournament restricted and banned lists, a calendar of special events such as

sneak preview tournaments for new sets, and other game news. More info can also be found at Upper Deck's tournament play site, www.ude.com/op.

For further info on the game, check out these independent Web sites, too:

- ✔ **Pojo.com:** This site has a huge amount of set info, strategy tips, deck lists, and loads of other goodies. If you're feeling particularly adventurous, it also has sections for numerous other trading card games, including *Pokémon* and *Duel Masters*.
- ✔ **YuGiOhRealms.com:** This is another great source of info that has a searchable card database and card inventory tool.

Additionally, if you're into playing online games, check out the digital version of the game at www.yugioh-online.net. It gives you a chance to play with opponents anywhere in the world!

Chapter 9

Fighting for Truth, Justice, and Superhero Supremacy with HeroClix

In This Chapter

- ▶ Adding a new dimension to collectible gaming
 - ▶ Putting the “Clix” into *HeroClix*
 - ▶ The flying fists and furious footwork of *HeroClix*
 - ▶ Looking through the many superhero sets
 - ▶ Summoning your characters to battle
 - ▶ Giving your forces an added POW! BANG! BOOM!
 - ▶ Expanding your games
-

Trading card games are great. They’re fun, they’re portable, and you’ve got zillions of different ways to play them. What gaming cards don’t do well, though, is tussle with each other. Instead of throwing each other through a plate glass window or into a brick wall, cards just kinda lay there on the table, where even a stiff breeze can blow them away.

Not that I’m advocating violence, of course, but most games in this genre are based around some kind of battle, whether it’s slaying enemy beasts with a sword, shooting outlaws with a Colt .45, or simply getting opposing pets to faint. And where cards fall short in physically acting out the brouhahas, miniatures take that task and go nuts with it.

Enter *HeroClix*. WizKids’ game of miniature battling superheroes has brought the epic fights from the comic world onto tabletops in basements and game shops everywhere. Instead of limiting themselves to shuffling up a few decks, players are able to realistically show exactly how their favorite heroes and villains duke it out with each other. Best of all, it’s easy to understand and as addictive as anything.

Bringing Superheroes to Life in 3-D

If you've got a favorite superhero, odds are he or she has shown up in *HeroClix*. **Batman**, **Wonder Woman**, **Superman**, and **Spider-Man** — heck, just about all superheroes with “man,” “woman,” “boy,” or “girl” in their name — have all made it into the game.

Of course, the bad guys and gals are there, too, with **The Joker**, **Dr. Doom**, **Scarlet Witch**, and **Magneto** showing their evil faces (or lack thereof!). Even obscure characters like **Nimrod**, **Beta Ray Bill**, and **Kilowog** have graced *HeroClix* at one point or another.

With *HeroClix*, WizKids has taken these many characters — more than 1,000 different figures to date — and turned them into realistic, movable fighting machines. Characters with super strength or mind control in the comics have had such powers translated very elegantly into stats that represent those abilities in the game. Stronger figures last longer and hit harder, and flying heroes can zoom around the game board.

And if you've ever seen those old tabletop war games with hundreds of miniature figures, don't worry; there's no gigantic rule book to pore through, no reams of graph paper to spread out. Even the painting has already been done, so you can instantly break out your figs and start playing. Of course, you first need to know how to play, right?

Clicking through the Dial

Although the cool detailed modeling work on a *HeroClix* figure brings the character to life, the base of the fig is where the meat and potatoes of the game lay. It's where you find all of the piece's stats and special abilities, as well as the clicking dial that gives the game its name.

Around the edge of the base is a series of numbers and symbols. For example, starting on the rear side of Batman's figure, shown in Figure 9-1, is the name of the figure followed by his team symbol. The yellow Batman symbol denotes that, shockingly, he's a member of the Batman Ally team. Team affiliation plays a part in a more advanced version of the game — a version I leave unexplored for the time being — in which the symbol grants a special ability to any team member. (What kind of special ability? Well, one that definitely allows that character to hit harder in combat, for starters.)

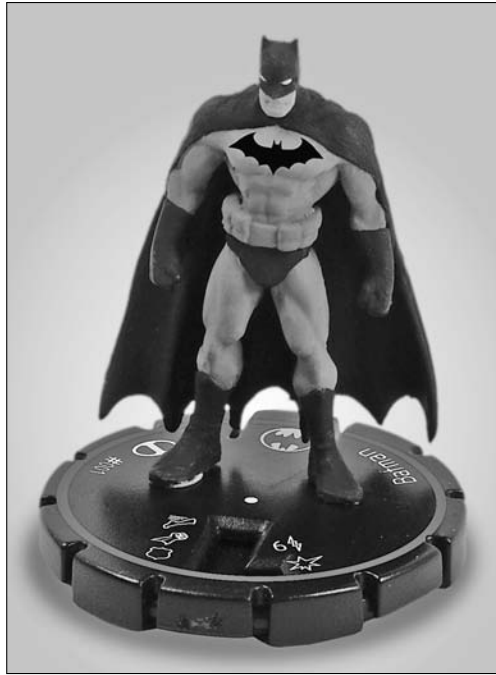


Figure 9-1:
If you promise not to tell anyone that **Batman** is really Bruce Wayne, I'll keep mum as well.

Next to the team symbol is **Batman's** *point value* of 47. In the grand scheme of things, that places this version of Bats in the midrange; the higher the number, the more powerful a figure generally is. A figure's point value also figures in at the end of the game when determining the winner; the higher the value, the more a character counts toward its vanquisher's victory. To the right of that number is a *set symbol* of an *I* in an oval, which denotes that this **Batman** version is from the *DC Icons* expansion for the game. Finally, next to that is his *collector's number*, #001.

Around the edge of the figure is a blue circle. This means that you've got an *experienced* version of Batman here — one who's more powerful than the yellow-circled *rookie* version, but less powerful than the red-circled *veteran* version. *Unique* figures are special versions that come in only one form per expansion or as a special limited-edition version. Regular-issue figures have a silver circle, whereas limited-edition (LE) ones have a bronze circle. You can have only one copy on your team of any unique character in terms of name, set symbol, and collector's number.



You might also come across figures that have gold or purple rings around their edges. The gold circles are reserved for ultra-rare figures, which have been included in the last few expansions at a rate of one per 96- or 97-figure set. The purple rings appear on limited-run versions of regular silver-ringed uniques that have been given away as prizes at prerelease tournaments for *HeroClix* expansions.

The really interesting part of the base, though, is the window in the front. By twisting the *combat dial* on the bottom of the figure, you can rotate the numbers that show up through this window. The higher the number for any stat, the better. What do they all stand for? I describe them for you in the following list:

- ✔ On the top left is the *speed value*, usually denoted by a boot-in-motion icon. This shows how many spaces on the game map a figure can move each turn. **Batman's** starting speed is 8, which is pretty decent. Some figures have a wing icon, which means that they can *fly*. Flying characters can either *hover* near the ground, where they can transport other characters, or, if they're in an outdoor location, they can *soar*, avoiding any terrain in their way. Also, some characters have a dolphin icon, meaning that they can move through water as if they were running.
- ✔ Below the speed value is the *attack value*, which has a punching fist icon next to it. This shows how likely the character is to connect when he attacks in hand-to-hand combat. **Batman's** is 10, which is okay, but nothing special compared to many other figures.
- ✔ On the bottom left is the *defense value*, which has a shield icon next to it. This describes how hard it is to hit a character when he or she is attacked. **Batman's** 16 is pretty high; he's pretty fast on his feet!
- ✔ On the bottom right is the *damage value*, denoted by a starburst icon. This indicates how hard the character hits. **Batman's** 2 damage can knock a character out twice as fast as someone with 1.
- ✔ Finally, above the damage value is the only stat that remains constant, the *range value*. This has one or more lightning bolt icons and shows how far a character's ranged attack — a thrown or fired weapon, for example — can reach. The number of bolts shows how many targets can be range-attacked at once. **Batman's** range is 6, and he's limited to one target here.

You'll also see different colors in the spaces that show through the dial. These represent many of the different *powers* that show up in the game, and they do everything from making figures move faster to making them invulnerable to giving them stronger attacks to other special abilities. **Batman's** orange box — you'll have to trust me on that one, given that all the figures in this book are in black and white — in the speed area shows that he has the

leap/climb ability, which lets him move around more easily and scale high walls, as well as attack soaring flyers. In the defense section, he has a maroon box, which means he has *will power*, a way to avoid damage. And his damage box is black, meaning he has *outwit*; this counters a single opposing power or can keep a flyer from soaring.

Most characters start out with certain abilities and stats that change over time as they take more and more clicks of damage. Sometimes this means that they're getting weaker, but other times it means that their adrenaline's really kicking in and they get even stronger!

Also, some figures have colored bases rather than the black ones that most figures have. If two different figures with the same set symbol also have the same-colored base, they're *arch enemies*. This counts when you figure out a game's winner and in other capacities.

Replaying That Cool Battle in Issue #1

Before you start a *HeroClix* game, you need to choose a maximum team point total. Increments should always be in multiples of 100, and the value should be the same for both players — unless you want to handicap a more experienced player. Also make sure to grab a pair of six-sided dice — they're included in a starter set if you don't have any handy — because you'll need them to resolve battles and to perform some other actions.

Also, you'll need to decide on a battlefield on which to play. After you randomly determine who goes first, the player who goes first chooses a map — a couple are included in a starter set, and you can buy more in other packs or make more yourself — and then the other player selects an edge of the map on which to place his or her team. Maps include buildings, trees, and other forms of *terrain*. While most spaces are clear, some have *hindering terrain*, which obstructs a character's movement, or *blocking terrain*, which stops movement and also blocks any line of fire in an attack. The first player then chooses an edge on which to start. After you place your characters, you're ready to start the game!

Many games out there have long, involved turns with tons of different steps. *HeroClix* isn't one of them. Instead, each turn simply has a number of *actions* a player can make; this number is equal to the maximum total number of points allowed for a team that you're playing with divided by 100. So if you and your friends agree to play with 200-point maximum teams, you each get two actions per turn. Teams with 300 points max get three, and so on.

When your figure takes action, you put an action token beside that character — use a small object like a coin or glass bead as a marker. That character may rest on the next turn — removing the action token in the process — or it can soldier on and use an action on the next turn, earning a second action token and one click of *pushing* damage to show that the character is exhausted or overexerted. A single character may take only one action per turn, and a character with two tokens may take only *free actions*, which I go over shortly.

Actions may be used to move a character, to use one of his or her powers, or to initiate an attack against another character or characters. Some powers also grant additional free actions that have special restrictions on what they can be used for, but they don't count toward your action total for the turn. To use a *power action*, you simply announce that you're using a character's power and follow the power's instructions set in the rules. A handy power reference card is included in all starter sets, but you need to grab one from each of the latest Marvel and DC sets (and the Indy set) in order to have a full list.

To move a character, you simply move it any number of spaces on the board up to its speed value. It can move vertically, horizontally, or diagonally and may pass through a space containing another figure on your team, but not one with an enemy on it. The move must end on an empty space. Also, if the character moves away from a grid square that's next to an enemy figure, he or she has to *break away* by rolling a die. If you roll less than 4, the character is stuck where he or she is; on a 4 or higher, the character may move normally.

Close combat actions: Duking it out

The heart of the *HeroClix* game, of course, is the battle between the players' teams. All of the other actions and choices in the game involve setting up your characters in the most advantageous positions possible when they're ready to fight with the opposing characters.

When your figure is adjacent to an enemy figure, you can use a *close combat action* to initiate a battle with that figure. To determine whether you hit or miss, simply roll both of your dice and add the total to the attacker's attack value. If it's less than the defender's defense value, you swing and miss, but if it's greater than or equal to the defender's defense value, you hit! When you hit, twist the defender's combat dial a number of clicks equal to the attacker's damage value.

So if you use **Batman** to attack the villainous **Harley Quinn**, shown in Figure 9-2, you'll be facing off his attack value of 10 against her defense value of 15. If you roll a 6 or higher, you hit for **Batman**'s damage value of 2 and click Harley twice.



Figure 9-2: Harley Quinn's a jester you might like to court for your supervillain team.

If you roll a 2, it's called a *critical miss*, and the attack automatically fails; in fact, it fails so badly due to your character's obvious incompetence that he or she takes a click of damage instead! If you roll a 12, though, it's called a *critical hit* and the defender takes an extra click of damage.

If you roll any doubles besides a 2, the defender suffers *knockback*, which means that the attack's force was great enough to throw him or her into another space. Move the defender directly away from the attacker a number of spaces equal to the damage taken. If the character hits a wall or other terrain during knockback, he or she stops there and takes an additional click of damage.

When a character's dial shows three *KO* symbols, that character is knocked out. Remove the figure from the battlefield; he or she will count toward victory for the player who defeated the character.

Ranged combat actions: Ready, aim, fire!

Even if your figure is not right next to an opposing figure, you can still often attack opposing figures by using a *ranged combat action*. If you can draw a

straight line between the two characters, if the distance in squares between the two characters is less than or equal to the potential attacker's range value, and if the line of sight between the two figures isn't blocked by other characters or by blocking terrain, you may use the attacker's ranged combat attack.

Ranged combat works basically the same way as close combat, except that you can split up your ranged attacks among a number of targets equal to the number of lightning bolt icons next to your figure's range value. To resolve combat, you roll your dice once and compare your values to each of the defenders the same way you did in close combat. Because the defenders might have different defense values, you might miss some but hit others.

The endgame: Victory and defeat

There are a few different ways to determine when a game of *HeroClix* is over. Most commonly, you finish when one team's characters have all been knocked out. You can also play for a predetermined amount of time or number of rounds. Whenever you've reached the agreed-upon end, you'll tally up each side's *victory points* to determine who wins the game.

To determine your victory point total, add the point values for all figures that you've knocked out of the game to the point values for all figures you have left standing at the end. If you've knocked out a character's arch enemy with that character, double the KO'd character's point total. The player with the higher victory point total wins! If there's a tie, the player whose own team has the lowest point value wins.

Finding Your Favorite Figures

Since its first set back in 2002, WizKids has released nearly 20 expansions for *HeroClix*. Most sets contain about 96 figures, split up among rookie/experienced/veteran versions of about 28 different characters plus about a dozen uniques per set. Each set also has 8 to 20 special limited-edition figures that are secret identities of superheroes and supervillains in the set. In the following sections, I discuss where you can find some of your faves.

Marvel's fantastic forces

There's the chocolate/vanilla divide, the National League/American League divide, the Coke/Pepsi divide, the Beatles/Rolling Stones divide, and the Marvel/DC divide. Here's what you have on the Marvel side of the fence:

- ✓ **Infinity Challenge:** The first *HeroClix* set, *Challenge* contains many of the classic favorite characters, including **Spider-Man**, **Hulk**, **Wolverine**, **Captain America**, and **Elektra**. Other members of the Avengers, X-Men, Brotherhood, and Sinister Syndicate make up most of the set.
- ✓ **Clobberin' Time:** This Fantastic Four–themed set has team members **Mr. Fantastic**, **Invisible Woman**, **Human Torch**, and **Thing**, as well as a super-powerful **Nightcrawler** figure, still one of the most coveted and expensive pieces (point-wise) in the game.
- ✓ **Xplosion:** The X-Men are the name of the game here, with **Storm**, **Psylocke**, **Colossus**, **Gambit**, and others showing up here. **Hulk** also showed up again in this expansion.
- ✓ **Critical Mass:** This set dug a bit deeper into the Marvel universe, with lesser-known characters like **Calypso**, **Terrax**, and **Dormammu** entering the scene. The symbiant Spider-Man-wannabe **Venom** and a strong, unique **Silver Surfer** figure were highlights of the set.
- ✓ **Universe:** The first *HeroClix* reprint set gives new players easier access to older figures from the first couple of sets while streamlining some overly weak and overly powerful figures. New versions of several characters like **Hobgoblin** and **Sabretooth** appear in the set's starters.
- ✓ **Ultimates:** Characters from Marvel's *Ultimates* storyline appeared here, including **Iron Man**, **Baron Zemo**, **Carnage**, and **Thor**. **Peter Parker** also showed up as a secret-identity limited-edition version of **Spider-Man**.
- ✓ **Mutant Mayhem:** Notable for containing the huge ultra-rare figure **Giant-Man**, *Mayhem* also includes a strong, unique **Loki** and a promo version of **Polaris**.
- ✓ **Fantastic Forces:** Updated versions of the Fantastic Four are the marquee figures in this set, as is a set of three versions of **Nightcrawler** that are more balanced than *Clobberin' Time*'s original version.
- ✓ **Armor Wars:** This **Iron Man**–centered set also includes **Titanium Man**, **Iron Monger**, **Crimson Dynamo**, and yet another unique version of **Spider-Man**.

DC's daring heroes and villains

Where there's Marvel, DC can't be far behind:

- ✓ **Hypertime:** DC's first launch into the *HeroClix* realm marked the first appearances of popular characters like **Batman, Robin, Catwoman, Superman, The Flash,** and **The Joker**. Other Justice League members like **Aquaman** and **Hawkman** show up here, too.
- ✓ **Cosmic Justice:** *Justice* brings **Wonder Woman, Green Lantern,** and **Lex Luthor** to the game, as well as a cool alternate vampire version of **Batman**.
- ✓ **Unleashed:** New versions of **Wonder Woman, Batman,** and **Superman** are the hot figures here, with some more obscure characters like **Metallo, Kilowog,** and **Magog** also proving to be worthy figures.
- ✓ **Legacy:** Focused on DC's *Kingdom Come* comics, *Legacy* contains versions of **Hawkman, Robin, The Flash,** and **Green Lantern** from that story arc, with the last two figures among the most sought-after in the game. **Ra's al-Ghul, Sinestro,** and an ultra-rare version of **Steel** are other notable figures here.
- ✓ **Icons:** This isn't a reprint set, but it contains new versions of many figures who already appeared in the game and were due for updates or alternates. **Batman, Superman, Lex Luthor,** and **The Flash** all made waves here, as did **Brainiac** and the promo **Dark Knight Detective** figure.

Additionally, in 2003, WizKids released an *Indy HeroClix* base set made up of characters from numerous lines of independent comics. It contained some well-known Indy faves like **Hellboy, Witchblade, Judge Dredd,** and **Shi**. It was also the only release to have a separate subset of figures exclusively available in Europe; several Euro-only characters from the *2000 A.D.* storyline, including **Stix** and **Nemesis**, showed up here. Later on, the *City of Heroes* and *City of Villains* computer games included several promotional figures. And as convention exclusives, WizKids sold limited numbers of a few gigantic special-release figures, including **Galactus** and **Dark Phoenix**.

Assembling a Basic Team

With *HeroClix*'s mixing-and-matching ability, it's possible to create pretty much any team of characters that you'd like to, as long as their point totals fit within the limits that you've agreed upon with whomever you're playing.

A popular point total is 300 because it allows for reasonably quick games — they should take less than an hour — while still allowing each player to have a decent number of choices on each turn with the three actions per turn.

You can mix *HeroClix* figures on a team from more than one set — or even across the Marvel/DC divide — but to give you a simple idea of what a sample team can look like, I show you a sample team that uses figures from the Batman Ally and Teen Titans teams from DC's *Icons* expansion. I also leave out the uniques and limited editions because you'd have to buy a good number of boosters right off the bat or fork over at least \$15 or \$20 to get a specific unique, plus the LEs are available only through special means. I use just five figures here, so you'll be able to put this team together for just a few bucks!

So, without further ado, here are the members of a good 300-point team:

- ✔ **Batman (starter set version):** For 47 points, **Batman** starts out with his movement-enhancing *leap/climb* and ability-countering *outwit* powers and also avoids pushing damage with his *will power*. He loses some of these after taking damage, but after he takes four clicks of damage, he gains *incapacitate*, an attack that puts an action token on an opposing character instead of dealing it damage.
- ✔ **Robin (starter set version):** The cheapest team member, at 22 points, **Robin** also starts out with *leap/climb* as well as a speed of 7, attack of 8, range of 4, defense of 16, and damage of 2. He also has a nifty *smoke cloud* attack power that can set up hindering terrain around him for a turn, plus *energy shield/deflection* on defense, which boosts his defense value by 2 against ranged combat attacks.
- ✔ **Beast Boy (veteran version):** The most expensive character on the team, at 86 points, **Beast Boy** has starting stats of 10 speed — he's a quick one! — attack of 9, defense of 16, and a strong damage of 3. If you want to use an action for his *charge* power, you trade off half of that speed, but you get a free close combat action to attack with him. Later on, this becomes *plasticity*, which makes it easier for him to break away and harder for enemies to do so. He also has a nasty *quake* attack that reduces his damage to 2 for the turn, but hits everyone for knockback; after taking some damage, this becomes *blades/claws/fangs*, which lets him destroy blocking terrain and walls. And there's more! On defense, he starts with *invulnerability*, which reduces damage to him by 2, then gets *toughness*, which reduces it by 1. Toward the end of his click dial, this becomes *super senses*, which lets him evade attacks. Finally, he also gets *exploit weakness* near the end, too; this lets his attacks ignore damage-reducing powers.

- ✓ **Starfire (experienced version):** Costing 77 points, **Starfire** also has a slick 10 speed to start, plus an attack of 8, range of 10, defense of 15, and a whopping 4 damage. Her *running shot*'s similar to **Beast Boy's charge** power, except she can use it for a ranged attack instead of close combat. She also has *toughness* on defense.
- ✓ **Raven (experienced version):** **Raven's** 68 points get a starting speed of 10, attack of 8, range of 8, defense of 16, and damage of 2. Her *phasing/teleport* power lets her ignore terrain when moving and lets her automatically break away from enemies, and, like **Batman**, she also has *incapacitate* as an attack. On defense, she has *barrier*, which is like Robin's *smoke cloud* except it creates blocking terrain; the barrier attack goes away after three clicks of damage, but after the fourth click, she gets *regeneration*, which heals some of her damage. Additionally, she's got *probability control*, which lets you reroll a die each time the power's used or forces an opponent to do so; this becomes *support*, which heals an adjacent character on your team.

In addition to all these cool powers, everyone here has a team ability. **Batman** and **Robin** are on the Batman Ally team; this lets them treat any lines of fire directed at them through hindering terrain as if they went through blocking terrain. The other three are on the Titans team, which lets them deal one click of pushing damage to one of the team members in order to heal an adjacent Titans figure of one click of damage.

Mixing and Matching with Figures, Tokens, and Cards

If you want to spend a bit more money or crack open a bunch of boosters, you can add plenty of other figures to your team. The DC *Icons* set has some cool unique figs like Titans team members **Terra**, who has a nasty *force blast* power that throws an enemy back so they can no longer harm you, and **Cyborg**, whose *pulse wave* attack can nail several characters anywhere within six squares on the battlefield. Plenty of other characters from all of the other expansions can fit well with this team, and the possibilities for building any number of other teams are endless.

Additionally, you can use other enhancements that aren't figures but still affect the game significantly. *Battlefield conditions* are cards that change the rules that apply to figures on a battlefield; for example, the **Madness** battlefield condition switches critical hits and critical misses with each other, plus

it diminishes the *support* power's healing from a critical hit. You can play with one such card on any given team.

Feats, on the other hand, are cards that affect just a single character. They have point totals, so you can factor into your team point total how many you want to include rather than being limited to one. For instance, the **Submerged** feat costs 5 points and allows a swimming figure that's occupying water terrain to have that water block all lines of fire to it.

You can also use *objects*, which add more features to the battlefield itself, and *bystander tokens*, which act like figures except they're just two-dimensional. They have combat values, but are knocked out if they ever take damage.

Extra! Extra! Secret Superhero Lair Discovered!

HeroClix has one of the biggest followings of players and collectors among any tradeable miniatures or trading card game. In fact, many comic book fans collect the figures simply because they like the characters and don't even bother to play the game. Yep, they're missing out!

WizKids runs many tournaments of all sizes throughout the course of each year. Game conventions usually have a variety of *HeroClix* tourneys, with the big summer conventions having both the largest tourneys (with the biggest prizes) and the most demo and learning games. Many local game shops, though, run small tournaments with limited-edition figures as prizes; these are great ways to get your foot in the door. Shops also run a series of events called New Guy Nights (don't worry, gals can play too!), in which experienced players can bring friends to stores and teach them the game, and then both players receive exclusive promotional figures, too!

There's also a wealth of info to be found for the game. Here are a few of the most comprehensive places you should check out if you want to expand your *HeroClix* knowledge:

- ✔ WizKids' official site for the game is located at — surprise! — www.heroclix.com. You can find everything here from figure galleries of all of your favorite characters to special scenarios that have unique win conditions to tournament info and strategy tips.
- ✔ HCREalms' site — www.hcrealms.com — has fan forums where you can discuss your latest team build with other players or debate whether

Spider-Man would beat **Superman** in a fight. You can also catalog your *HeroClix* collection here or use the site's handy search function to look up figures by a number of different criteria.

- ✓ *InQuest Gamer* and *Scrye* magazines both publish monthly strategies, scenarios, and feature articles on new *HeroClix* sets. You can also find price guides on figures here, as well as info on market trends. *InQuest Gamer* even has *HeroClix* strategy tips and news at www.wizarduniverse.com/inquest.

Part III

Shuffling through the Rest of the Decks

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



“Other than placing a ‘Call The Horde’ card on the prosecuting attorney’s table, what was your defense strategy for my case?”

In this part . . .

You can't run a thrilling horse race without a full field of jockeys and animals in the action. If only the best pair of horses ran head-to-head, where's the excitement? The race doesn't get interesting until you fill out the field with long-shot ponies to mix things up with the favorites! Why do the other horses add excitement? Because one of those ponies *might* pull ahead of the leaders and ultimately take the prize. The tension and uncertainty make the race exciting for everybody.

Trading card games work a lot like horse racing, at least from a sales and popularity perspective. Most of the games look fun and fascinating when they start the race, but you never really know which one will ultimately win the popularity prize. The one you picked as a "sure thing" might go lame in the middle of the back turn, while the game that looked dead on arrival sails to victory. Who can plumb the mysteries of the marketplace? (Certainly not me, or I wouldn't have scads of *Young Jedi* cards stored in my closet.)

The games in this part represent the rest of the field — the proverbial contenders that run alongside the Big Six discussed in Part II. They come from all sorts of backgrounds and offer a wide variety of play possibilities. Some appeal to anime aficionados, others to science fiction folk, and still others to manga mavens and literature lovers.

Look for a hook that interests you — anime, literature, or whatever — and see what you can find. Don't be surprised if you discover new games that didn't make it into this book or that some of the games in here now live in the discount bin of your local game store. It happens. Such is life in the world of trading card games: Today's top dog turns into tomorrow's card-house construction material. (I'd close with a proverb like "The rise and fall of card games are like the ebb and flow of life," but that's too philosophical for a part like this. Instead, just go have fun with the games.)

Chapter 10

Bringing Comic Books, Manga, and Anime to Life

In This Chapter

- ▶ Solve the mystery with *Case Closed*
 - ▶ Battle with digital creatures in *Digimon*
 - ▶ Save the world from war in *Dragon Booster*
 - ▶ Collect your goodies in *Dragon Ball Z* and *GT*
 - ▶ Discover the ways of giant monster fighting in *Duel Masters*
 - ▶ Help undo a great wrong (or make a great wrong of your own) in *Fullmetal Alchemist*
 - ▶ Go back in time and reassemble a mystical jewel in *Inuyasha*
-

Which came first: the TV show, the comic book, or the game? Look back to the late 1990s for a moment. Did *Pokémon* explode in popularity back then because kids played the game and then fell in love with the TV show or because they watched the TV show and flocked to the game? The world may never know. Either way, kids bought a lot of *Pokémon* cards — and a huge group of players still buy plenty today.

Over the years, Japan's longstanding love of *anime* (a style of animated TV show) and *manga* (an illustrated novel format) produced hundreds — if not thousands — of popular stories. At some point, those stories migrated from the screen or the printed page into the world of collectible card games. Players could read and watch their favorite storylines unfold and then grab their decks and play things out their own way.

The two-pronged combination of entertainment and a card game became a powerful and profitable business model. The model works so well, in fact, that some of today's anime shows are little more than 30-minute tutorials on how to play the show's associated card game.

This chapter guides you through the ever-growing selection of anime and manga-inspired trading card games on the market. It introduces each game, tells a little of the game's back story, and briefly describes the game's play style. It also points you to more information about the game on the manufacturer's Web site.



If you find a game for your favorite show (or if one of these just looks fascinating), visit the game's Web site and look for demonstration information. Most of the sites offer a retail and a tournament locator so you can find both places in your area that support the game and new opponents to challenge.

Case Closed

www.caseclosedtcg.com
Score Entertainment, Inc.

When the going gets tough for Police Inspector Meguire, he turns to 17-year-old super-detective Jimmy Kudo for help. (See Figure 10-1.) Jimmy's talent for uncovering clues and unmasking villains helps the Inspector successfully unravel case after case. But as Jimmy follows yet another trail toward a mysterious crime organization, the criminals strike back with a bizarre poison that shrinks Jimmy to the size of an 8-year-old elementary school student but leaves his memories and deductive abilities untouched.

To protect his family from danger (and to move the plot along), Jimmy changes his name to Conan Edogawa. With the help of the friendly inventor Dr. Agasa (who knows Jimmy's secret identity), Conan moves in with a private detective's family, forms a kid's detective club, and continues solving mysteries, all the while still searching for the mysterious crime organization and an antidote to the poison they fed him. Dr. Agasa's many gadgets (like the power-boost sneakers, solar-powered skateboard, and voice-changing bow tie) help Conan overcome the limitations of his tiny size and provide fodder for comedic mishaps along the way. Thus far, the show's continuing saga fills over 300 episodes, making *Case Closed* the longest-running anime series ever.

Score Entertainment distilled the show's basic concepts (and plentiful artwork) into the *Case Closed* trading card game. To capture the feeling of the series, the players try to help their detectives solve mysteries while simultaneously mobilizing criminals to prevent their opponents from doing the same thing. The game works well in one-on-one play, but also includes two sets of multiplayer rules for either an "everybody for themselves" style of cutthroat play or the more cooperative "detective agency" version.

A normal *Case Closed* deck consists of three separate smaller decks: the Case Deck, Main Deck, and Problem Deck. Each smaller deck covers one section of an average episode, including the mysteries to solve, the heroes and villains involved in the plot, the wonderful devices Conan uses, and the many complications that happen along the way. The total deck size always runs between 65 and 100 cards, depending on how you want to assemble your Case Deck and Main Deck. (The Problem Deck always holds exactly 20 cards, so you really can't do much with that other than shove 20 cards into it. For more on decks in general, check out Chapter 1.)



Figure 10-1:
Super
Sleuth
Jimmy Kudo
is on the
case.

The game's premiere set was released in mid-2005. It features a semi-random 80-card starter set — *semi-random* in that it comes with 20 fixed cards and 60 randomly assorted cards. Each booster pack adds another 10 cards to your collection. Overall, the first set includes a little over 200 cards. The game's first expansion, titled *Crime and Punishment*, introduces new gameplay elements and a little over 120 new cards.

Score Entertainment, Inc. — the entity behind *Case Closed* — supports tournaments at retail stores and game conventions with a mixture of promotional cards and other goodies. The game's Web site includes tips and rules for the game, information on convention tournament events, and a local store and tournament locator.

Digimon

www.digimonccg.com
Bandai America, Inc.

Are you one of the DigiDestined?

When a group of summer campers unexpectedly opens a door to the Digital World, they start the adventure of a lifetime. First, they meet and befriend the

tiny digital monsters (the Digimon) who inhabit the land. Soon, powerful synergies develop as the Digimon and the kids get to know each other and discover their mutual strengths.

With the Digimon as their guides, the group explores the weird and wonderful DigiWorld, uncovering mysteries, fighting evil, and generally having a great time together. The kids and their associated Digimon learn the power of Digivolving, which turns the little Digimon into powerful fighting machines. Along the way, the kids find that they, the DigiDestined, have special powers to help their Digimon friends in their battles against evil.

The *Digimon Collectible Card Game* lets two players at a time create, cast, and play out their own Digimon battles. Rather than delve into the deeper plots and subterfuges that drive the DigiWorld in the show, the game focuses exclusively on the climactic battles that determine the world's fate. As the Digimon challenge each other in the game, the players earn Data Points. Get enough points and you win!



Each player assembles a deck of at least 50 cards, although you can use more if you want. You can include up to three copies of most cards in a deck, although you can use only *one* copy of any card with the term *GigaPower* in its effect text. The effect text is the text found on the lower half of the card that describes the effect the card has on the game's storyline.

Digimon themselves fill up most of the deck. They come in four versions: Rookie, Champion, Ultimate, and Mega. During the game, you can play a Rookie Digimon from your hand to the Digivolve row of the playmat, where Digimon do battle in this game. From there, the Digimon can either face combat in the Attack Row or stay in the Digivolve row until you replace it with a Champion-level Digimon. Likewise, Ultimate-level Digimon can replace Champions, and Megas take the place of Ultimates.

The other cards in your deck grant your Digimon more power or protection, help them Digivolve, or throw some other curve into the game. The DigiDestined (the kids who wandered into the DigiWorld and teamed up with the Digimon at the beginning of the story) give the Digimon attack or defense bonuses. Digivice cards help your monsters grow more powerful by changing them into different creatures. Some of the Digivice cards let a Rookie Digimon Digivolve straight into the super-powered Mega version!

Still, it's the Digi-Modify cards that really make the game wild. These cards throw some kind of radical change into the play. The effect happens immediately but doesn't last. These cards might do anything from making an opponent discard a card to letting you draw a bunch of extras. Sometimes you must discard a Digimon (called *offlining* in the game) before the effect takes place.

The game comes in three sets. The *Eternal Courage* release jumpstarted *Digimon* with two preset starters plus booster packs. The *Hybrid Warriors* expanded the original set with booster packs full of new Digimon and associated goodies. A

new starter set, called *Royal Knights*, takes the game into new territory, both in strategy and in looks, thanks to its gold-stamped Royal Knights Digimon.

If the game captures your interest, point your browser to the Digimon game Web site. You can connect with other DigiDestined players, preview new cards, swap tips and deck designs in the online community area, and generally revel in the DigiWorld.



For organized play information, visit <http://bandai.herofactorygames.com>. Bandai provides great prize support in the way of special cards for those who participate in tournament play, so you can definitely improve upon your decks in one of your area's tournaments.

Dragon Booster

www.dragonboostertcg.com
Score Entertainment, Inc.

Ten thousand years ago, the reptiles known as Star Dragons lived and worked in peace with humans, but the arrangement couldn't last. Over time, humans bred the Star Dragons into more specialized subspecies and treated them more like machines than equal partners in the world. As the subspecies grew more distant from the original Star Dragon line, the dragons changed color to match their working environment — and changed temperament, too.

Eventually, a terrible war broke out between the dragons and the humans. To prove that unity was still possible, the last pure Star Dragon partnered with a human Dragon Booster. After many battles, they brought peace to the land and restored the multicolored dragon lines to their original gold state.

Fast-forwarding to current time, we find that the humans forgot all about the problems with monocolored dragons (like the big war and all) and started their breeding programs again. Now they use specialized dragons for everything from work to commerce to entertainment — and particularly for dragon racing.

Racing crews breed their animals for speed, agility, strength, and ferocity. The teams also mill various colors of rare draconium metal into racing gear to enhance the racing dragons' power, although nobody remembers why the metal affects the dragons like it does. Mystery, subterfuge, death, and opportunity hang in equal doses over the races, drawing both the powerful and those seeking power.

Score's *Dragon Booster* trading card game dives into this high-stakes world of dragon racing. Players pick a dragon and rider team and then add gear, crew, maneuvers, and event cards. (See Figure 10-2.) As the cards hit the table, the

race begins! You can win by accumulating 30 points in the race or by running your opponents out of cards. Although it plays well for two, the game includes rules for massive multiplayer events.

Figure 10-2:
Race our
own dragon
with *Dragon
Booster*.



Each player in *Dragon Booster* uses two decks: the Dragon Deck and the Race Deck. The Dragon Deck contains your combined dragon and rider cards plus the gear you plan to use and the crew you brought along. In a twist, this deck starts the game *face-up* and *unshuffled*. During each turn, you can rifle through this deck and pull out whatever card you need. It puts a really wild spin on the game!

The Race Deck holds events and maneuvers. You treat the Race Deck like a normal deck of cards in a game — you shuffle it, keep it face-down, and draw cards from the top into your hand.

A turn in *Dragon Booster* starts with time to prepare your team by attaching (or *magging*, as they call it) new gear to the dragon or recruiting a crew member. Because you get only one card from the Dragon Deck each turn, you must weigh your options carefully. After that, the players draw two cards from their individual race decks and play Events or Maneuvers to give their dragons more power or to slow down the opponent. In the final stage of the turn, the dragons make the battle personal with a head-to-head attack (as modified by the Gear, Crew, Events, and Maneuvers cards, of course) against any foe at the table. The player with the most points wins.

The game's original base set launched in early 2005, and the first expansion set (known as *Release the Dragon*) releases in early 2006. Check the game's Web site for more details, as well as for the tournament schedule and a members-only discussion list.

Dragon Ball GT and Dragon Ball Z

www.dragonballgttcg.com and www.dbzcardgame.com
Score Entertainment, Inc.

The story of Dragon Ball Z follows Goku, a mysteriously powerful Earth warrior who becomes the first Super Saiyan in ten centuries. Goku, shown in Figure 10-3, doesn't know much about his own background until the Saiyans arrive on the scene, wanting to know why our planet still exists. Someone sent Goku to Earth as a baby, intending him to grow up and destroy the planet. Thanks to a solid smack to the head as a child, Goku lost all of his flatten-the-Earth "instructions" and became a power for truth, beauty, innocence, and good.



Figure 10-3:
Goku uses
his powers
for good
in *Dragon
Ball GT*.

Through more than 10 feature movies and 15 multiepisode television sagas, Goku and his cohorts protect the Earth while battling evil in all forms. Whether it's defeating Garlic Junior and his Spice Boys (Vinegar, Mustard, Spice, and Salt), battling the feared Majin Buu, or outwitting the sneaky Captain Ginyu and his metamorphosis beam, Goku and his team always come out on top.

With 11 expansions to its name, the *Dragon Ball Z* trading card game outlived many competitors. Now in its new incarnation, the *Dragon Ball GT* trading card game, the classic game continues forward into new territory while staying compatible with the classic *Dragon Ball Z*.

Both versions of the game focus on the part of *Dragon Ball Z* that keeps viewers coming back: the action-packed brawls! These are two-player games. To win a match of *Dragon Ball Z* or *Dragon Ball GT*, you must take your opponent down in two out of three games, either by emptying his life deck or by controlling all seven of the legendary Dragon Balls.

Deck building starts by selecting a Main Personality. You might choose one of the mighty Z Warriors or perhaps one of their evil archenemies. Whoever you pick, that character represents you in the battle. With your alter ego in place, you create a 60-card “life deck” of Ally Personalities, Mastery Cards, Combat Cards, Support Cards, and (of course) Dragon Ball Cards.

Like many other TCGs, the *Dragon Ball Z* games set some limits to your deck building. Among other things, you can include only one Main Personality in your deck, and none of your Ally cards can share the same name as another Ally or that deck’s Main Personality. The same thing goes for Dragon Balls, too — you can add only one copy of each Dragon Ball and one type of Dragon Ball to your deck. Other cards with the same title can appear up to three times in a deck.

Each turn in a *Dragon Ball Z* game starts by drawing three cards from your life deck. From there, the fighters prepare to brawl by powering up, playing Support cards, or using other card effects. All of this just sets the stage for the third part of the turn: combat! You attack your opponent either by using your Main Personality or by playing a Combat Card, but your opponent might try to refocus the attack with an attack of her own, to block the attack, or to otherwise negate the damage. When the attack ends, you resolve any effects that are triggered following a “successful” attack.

If you capture all of the Dragon Balls or run your opponent out of cards, you take the victory — at least for that game! From there, shuffle your cards and go at it again. Whoever wins two out of three games takes the victory for the match.



If *Dragon Ball Z* sounds interesting, join the game by picking up the *Dragon Ball GT* starter and some boosters. Score developed the newer GT game to expand the possibilities of the original game while also providing an easy point of entry for new players. After all, when you start playing a game, you don’t want to hear that the card your opponent just crushed you with came from a set that’s long out of print. That’s just not fun (and no, I’m *not* still bitter about the last time it happened to me).

The Web sites for each game include downloadable rules, card indexes, a message board, and information on organized play opportunities in your

area. You can also occasionally vote in polls, get information on upcoming major events, and read about the top players out there. If you get good at the game, *your* name might grace the Web site sometime!

Duel Masters

www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=duelmasters,,en
Wizards of the Coast

What happens when you combine a card game full of passion, patience, and discipline with a touch of magic and a special martial art called Kaijudo? You get the world of *Duel Masters*!

To most people, Shobu Kirifuda seems like a normal kid, just one among the many who love playing the *Duel Masters* trading card game and practicing at the Junior Duelist Center. But as the son of the legendary duelist Shori Kirifuda, Shobu brings special skills to the game. He's one of the rare group of players who know that *Duel Masters* is more than just a game — that the monsters on the cards really exist!

Duelists train hard to find out more about Kaijudo, the ancient art of fighting with giant monsters. Through their skills and their driving passion to win, Shobu and his fellow top-level duelists tap into the creatures' alternate universe and actually bring the monsters to life. This adds a new and deadly dimension to their games, but it just makes Shobu and his fellows want to learn and win all the more.

The real-life *Duel Masters* trading card game works just like the game in the show, but without the martial arts and “bringing monsters to life” parts, of course. It's a head-to-head duel, pitting you and your opponent in a battle of giant monsters and powerful spells.



Well, maybe I should qualify this “head-to-head” business. *Duel Masters* is a great game for one-on-one play, but you can also create big multiplayer battles either in a free-for-all format or with teams. The basic rules include all of the multiplayer variants as well, so flip to the back of the rule book to learn more.

A *Duel Masters* deck starts with at least 40 cards. You can include up to four copies of any particular card in the deck. Your deck consists of monsters, evolved monsters, and spells. Monsters handle most of the work by attacking your opponent while fending off incoming blasts. Spells add power to your monsters, grant you bonuses, destroy opposing monsters, and many other fascinating things. The evolved monsters first appeared in an expansion set. To play one of these, you need the unevolved basic version of the related monster in play. The evolved monsters let you “turn up the volume” on an existing monster by increasing the stats and adding new game text.

Every card in the deck serves a dual function. First, of course, it's either a monster, evolved monster, or spell. But you can also play the cards into your Mana Zone on the table. That's the resource area you use when paying for monsters and spells. You can add only one card per turn to your Mana Zone, and after a card goes there, you can't get it back out (unless another card lets you do it).

During each turn, you reset the cards in your Mana Zone, draw a card (yes, just *one*), and place one card into your Mana Zone. After that, the mayhem begins as you summon creatures, cast spells, and begin your attacks.

Mana represents one of the key elements in the game. You need Mana to cast spells, summon monsters, and sometimes to trigger special card effects. Your Mana Zone grows slowly as the game goes on because you can add only a single card to it during each turn. Worse yet, because the cards for your Mana Zone come from your hand, every card you place there is a card that you can't play in the game. Keep that in mind as you build decks. Make sure you include enough duplicates of important cards that you can afford to bury one or two in your Mana Zone.

You can get going with *Duel Masters* by picking up a base starter set and some boosters. In addition to the original release, *Duel Masters* currently includes six calm, relaxed expansions: *Stomp-a-Trons of Invincible Wrath*, *Thundercharge of Ultra Destruction*, *Evo-Crushinators of Doom*, *Survivors of the Megapocalypse*, *Shadowclash of the Blinding Light*, and *Rampage of the Super Warriors*. If you want to include the monster "evolution" concept in your deck, make sure you get some boosters or theme decks from the *Evo-Crushinators* set — that's where the Evolution mechanic got its start.

To get into the full swing of the game, head to the *Duel Masters* Web site. It includes lots of detailed card notes, an exhaustive list of events and tournaments, and the most up-to-date rules, rulings, and strategy articles. You can also plug into the online *Duel Master* community through the site's discussion area.

Good luck, duelist!

Fullmetal Alchemist

www.fma-tcg.com
JoyRide Entertainment

If you saw Edward and Alphonse Elric wandering down the road in some country village, you might stop and stare. Then again, the sight of a walking, talking, intelligent suit of armor ambling alongside a young man with two normal limbs and two shiny metal ones might encourage you, in the subtlest of ways, to mind your own business.

The adult-oriented *Fullmetal Alchemist* series follows the exploits of Edward and Alphonse Elric, two brothers on a hunt for the most mysterious and powerful of artifacts — the Philosopher’s Stone — so they can use its power to undo the damage they unwittingly did while trying to raise their mother from the dead.

Of course, any artifact worth “legendary” status draws hunters driven by more personal goals. In this case, Edward’s masters in the military want to turn the stone’s power to destruction, making their armies unstoppable and their control complete. Not to be outdone, a group of Homunculi (magically created beings), led by the raven-haired Lust (hey, I *warned* you that this was an adult-oriented series), want the stone for their own use. Who will find it first? And what will happen when the stone’s power is released?

Find out for yourself in the *Fullmetal Alchemist* trading card game, the first release from the folks at JoyRide Entertainment. In the game, your leader and his followers (this game is for two or more players) attempt to defeat the opposition at several locations, racking up clue points that lead you to the Philosopher’s Stone. When you get enough points or you defeat all of your opponent’s forces, you claim the victory!

A *Fullmetal Alchemist* deck consists of three pieces: the Leader Stack, the Location Deck, and the Main Deck. The Leader Stack holds increasingly powerful versions of your deck’s main character — the leader of your team. As you pass certain milestones in a game, you reveal a new, more powerful leader card. This simulates your leader gaining experience in the field and growing more skillful. You can include cards for only one leader, such as Edward Elric, Roy Mustang, or Father Cornello.

The name of the Location Deck tells you its purpose in life. The goal of the game involves searching for clues to the location of the Philosopher’s Stone, so you need places to search. Each player brings at least nine location cards to the game. Each location requires certain abilities to uncover clues (a high Alchemy or Strength, for instance), so include locations that fit the skills of your deck’s leader and support cards.

Most of your cards go in the Main Deck. This includes your Allies, Attachments, and Event Cards. Allies work with your Leader, adding their skills to your search party. Attachments play onto a Leader or Ally card to temporarily boost that character’s abilities or give it some other benefit. If the character card loses the Attachment, the bonus goes away. Event cards cover the gamut of plot complications and momentary bursts of heroism, greed, and inspiration.



Many of the cards include special text that tells both what the card does and when you can play it. Certain cards work only during certain moments in your turn. Pay close attention to the event timing as the game goes on. You don’t want to miss a chance to get an advantage over your opponent!

Thus far, the game's manufacturer released the initial base set of starters and boosters and announced plans for the first booster expansion. Watch the Web site for more news about future plans, as well as a local store finder, tournament locator, full game rules, frequently asked questions document, and lots more.

Inuyasha

www.inuyashatcg.com
Score Entertainment, Inc.

Like many anime tales, the story behind *Inuyasha* begins simply enough. On her birthday, a pretty teenage girl named Kagome is attacked by a giant, demonic centipede, which sends her back in time to Japan's feudal era. (I wish I had a nickel for every time an oversized insect cast *me* into feudal Japan!) There, while the giant centipede crushes a nearby village, our pretty teenage girl discovers that her body carries a magical crystal inside it, a gem coveted by the supernatural population who know that this gem can guarantee eternal life and power.

In the midst of being pursued by demons, Kagome meets a young, pointy-eared boy who is pinned to a tree by an arrow. (OK, I guess we can tell you that Young Pointy Ears is in fact the titular hero, **Inuyasha**, shown in Figure 10-4.) After a fight with the demonic centipede, she removes the arrow and frees the boy, who we later discover is half human and half demon, and who wants the magical crystal just as much as the next demon. The half-demon boy manages to kill the centipede and the crystal is recovered. Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately), the crystal breaks and scatters its shards to the four winds. The girl and the half-demon join forces and set out to find the shards, rebuild the jewel, and then change the world in a positive way. (Yes, I made that last bit up. Sorry.)

Okay — still with me? If so, then you can find a lot to like in the *Inuyasha* trading card game. In this two-player game, you set out to either collect the ten shards of the Shikon jewel or to run your opponent's deck down until he has no cards left. Either way, you take home the victory.

You start by building a deck centered around either heroes or villains, depending on whom you enjoy in the show or which cards live in your collection. These characters join together to fight the opposition and search for the lost crystal shards. In addition to the characters, your deck also usually includes some Locations for the characters to visit (and fight at), Items for your characters to use, and Events that throw a little twist into just about every aspect of the game.



Figure 10-4:
Inuyasha
seeks
shards of
the Shikon
jewel.

On a turn, you draw three cards into your hand and then play up to two cards to the table. The cards might bring new characters into play, add equipment to a current character, or give the characters a new location to search. Next, your characters fight each other in grand battles. Here's where the Event cards usually come into play. As your characters attack, Event cards can help your side, hinder your opponent, or prevent *other* cards from taking effect. The game is wildest during the battles — that's when all the action happens. Every time one of your characters defeats one of your opponent's characters, you steal a jewel shard. When you collect all ten of them, the game ends — and just in time for your victory celebration, too!

Currently, *Inuyasha* comes in a base set with a starter and boosters, plus several booster-only expansions: *Kijin*, *Yokai*, *Feudal*, and *Kassen*. Some of the sets introduce new mechanics to the game, such as the Power Up concept in the *Kassen* release. Your Friendly Local Game Store can tell you more about the specific cards and point you to the right combination of starters and boosters.

Visit the game's Web site for a downloadable demonstration deck, extensive card library, and the rest of the goodies you know and love, like organized play information and a store locator.

Chapter 11

Playing TV Shows and Movies on Your Tabletop

In This Chapter

- ▶ Meddling with some kids
 - ▶ Fighting for freedom with GI Joe
 - ▶ Seeking and destroying the One Ring
 - ▶ Peanuts! Popcorn! Baseball card game!
 - ▶ Playing with Luke, Leia, and Darth
 - ▶ Going where no card game has gone before
 - ▶ Wrestling with victory
-

There's something magical about spending time with your friends. You really get to know them and understand them. You find out what drives them. You figure out where they came from and begin to unravel the mysteries of their past. Of course, if you spend too much time with them, then the rest of the family can't watch what they want to, but the way I figure it, that's why digital video recorders exist.

You spend hours — and sometimes *years* — following your favorite group of TV or movie characters. Now, thanks to the wonders of trading card games, you can join the fun yourself. You can fiddle with the plots, reorganize the characters, and adjust the endings. Do all that and more with movie- and TV-based trading card games.

This chapter explores some of the best-known and most popular media-based games. From shows on Cartoon Network to the high drama of TV wrestling, card-game designers try to distill the flavor and excitement of those shows into their games. Media-based games cover a very broad range of ages and complexities as well, with offerings aimed at kids through adults.

Regardless of your media passion, come in and play!

Codename: Kids Next Door

www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=knw
Wizards of the Coast

Take a handful of animated ten-year-olds, a group of silly villains, and some slapstick humor, throw it into the Cartoon Network generator, and you end up with *Codename: Kids Next Door*. Where else can you play a game in which you battle evil minds like Stickybeard, the candy pirate, or Grandma Stuffum, whose only goal is to make every child round and plump?

In an attempt to fight the evil in their lives, five kids band together in Treehouse Headquarters, taking the codenames Numbuh One through Numbuh Five. Numbuh One, the team's fearless leader, often finds himself the main target of villainous adults. But never fear — the plucky kids always manage to save themselves from those evil plots!

Like real kids, some of the complications in the Kids' lives come from people their own size. Take the Delightful Children From Down The Lane, for instance. These clean, polite kiddoes wreak havoc with the denizens of the Treehouse Headquarters. Between "friends" like the Delightful Children and the goofy adults who populate the rest of their world, the Kids Next Door keep busy week after week (and game after game).



Codename: Kids Next Door is a straight-up kid's game aimed at ages five and up. Starters and booster packs include colorful cards packed with characters, settings, gadgets, and scenes from the show.

Players can use two different rule sets: Basic or Advanced. The Basic game plays much like the old *War* card game; each player turns over the top card of her deck, and the highest Battle number wins the card. If both cards turn up the same color, the first player to hit the Panic Button in the middle of the playmat wins the card. Win five cards and you win the game.

The Advanced game is a little more, well, advanced. This is a good first game for little trading card game players to grow into, provided they're reasonably small when they begin the hobby. In the advanced game, players have a choice between Battle and Build; either they Battle the other player's card or they use the card they draw to help Build the strength of their Treehouse. Building the strength of your Treehouse can help you power up other cards for a battle later. The player who wins five Battle cards wins the game.

Codename: Kids Next Door cards are sold in a two-player starter set that contains two 20-card decks. The starter box also includes a Panic Button, playmat, advanced rules, and stickers so players can customize their cards — or, if they prefer, their school notebooks. Each booster pack contains seven cards and stickers.

The current *Codename: Kids Next Door* release contains 120 cards and 15 unique sticker sheets. To play *Codename: Kids Next Door* by the Advanced rules, players create decks that contain no fewer than 20 cards. The only current deck design rule is that players can place no more than three of the same card into the deck at one time. Each deck can contain a combination of kids, villains, characters, tech cards, and actions.

Although cards fall into different categories, such as kids and villains, the current rules give no guidelines for using those categories. With action cards like **Freeze!**, **Flying Kick**, and **Clear Shot**, perhaps Wizards of the Coast plans to release *advanced*-Advanced rules that incorporate card names and perhaps card colors (blue, green, purple, red, and orange). It would be cool to see what the blue tech **S.K.Y.C.L.A.W.** card could do with a blue **Blast 'Em** action card attached.



The game also lets kids put a very personal twist into their stories, thanks to those stickers that come in every card pack. Players can put the stickers onto their scene cards to give them power in the game. It's a neat touch that connects the kids to the cards and gets the kids thinking about basic strategy at the same time.

A visit to the Web site offers a somewhat abbreviated online tutorial, answers to a couple of questions about the game, online puzzles, and most importantly, downloadable Instant Message icons and wallpaper for your computer screen. Fight tyranny and injustice and get a cool new IM icon, too. The gaming world doesn't get much better than this when you're small.

GI Joe

www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=gijoetcg
Wizards of the Coast

Cheer for the red, white, and blue and keep those flags flying! The *GI Joe* card game glows with patriotic pride. Whether your deck features the heroic GI Joe team or the archenemy Cobra, the side with the last soldier alive wins the game.

Enemies from long past, GI Joe and Cobra fight to control the world and its future. Each time players meet across the table, the scene enacts itself one more time. Under Duke, their brave and loyal leader, the GI Joe soldiers bring all their special skills to bear in the fight to keep freedom alive. Cobra members, on the other hand, exist to destroy all that is right and good in the world. Which one will win? It's up to the individual players, the cards they draw, and how skillfully they wield them.

To control the world and its fate, both players first deploy troops onto the playmat. In the base card set, every card functions as a soldier. The number

of troops a player deploys is determined by a set supply point value. Individual supply costs appear on every card, and the second player gets two more supply points to use as compensation for going second, which is a very nice touch to the game.

After the cards are deployed onto the table, it's time to engage in one-on-one combat. The One-on-One combat phase pits one soldier against another, using that soldier's power and perhaps a little Boost from a comrade. If the player deploys his cards well, the One-on-One phase can take a huge toll on his opponent's numbers. A good soldier combined with an excellent Boost from another card can mean the difference between a fallen soldier and a defeated foe.

Finally, both sides take part in a Firefight. The number of a player's cards left on the table determines the number of ammunition cards available to that player. Ammunition cards used alone or in combination can take out one or more enemies per turn.

In order to put together a winning deck, you need to consider the special abilities and strengths of various GI Joe and Cobra cards, in addition to supply cost. Various cards might sport text that aids a specific soldier in One-on-One combat or Firefight phases, or a card might give additional help when used as a Boost. While the Base *GI Joe* set contains 117 soldiers, with the release of the 78-card *Armored Strike* expansion, the game includes vehicles such as submersibles, motorcycles, and jeeps. The starter package contains two 30-card decks, and a regulation deck contains 50 cards, which gives plenty of room for duplicate cards and strategy in the deck design.

To gain a good understanding of the game, visit the Wizards of the Coast Web site and view the excellent online tutorial. After watching the tutorial a couple of times, I was ready to find another player and begin deck building myself, not to mention digging out that tiny American flag I remember storing after the last Fourth of July. Yo, Joe!

Lord of the Rings

<http://decipher.fanhq.com/TCG/CardLists.aspx?gameID=7>
Decipher

Once upon a time in Middle Earth, there was a ring and a quest. Or perhaps there was a queen and a rest? No, that was another tale, and it actually centered around a princess and her rest. Anyway, the *Lord of the Rings* trading card game takes the beloved story off the movie screen (which took it off the books' pages) and places it firmly in front of you on the tabletop.

While most trading card games ask you to create a deck of one affiliation or the other, *Lord of the Rings* decks contain both Fellowship cards and Shadow

cards. Thus, a player plays both sides of the conflict throughout the game. During his Fellowship phase, he represents the side of goodness and right, while during his opponent's Fellowship phase, he counters with Shadow cards. This creates immediate conflict for both players.

Because the goal of the game involves sending the Ringbearer to the end of the adventure path, both players place a ring card of some type into their decks. Apart from the ring card, a *Lord of the Rings* deck requires at least 60 cards, split evenly between Fellowship and Shadow cards (characters, events, and so on for each faction). The deck also needs nine adventure cards, which create the journey.

In addition to deck cards, players use tokens to mark wounds on characters, to show exertion when a character performs beyond his normal ability, and to create the Twilight Pool. An interesting game mechanic, the Twilight Pool piles tokens in the middle of the table as a player's Fellowship phase unfolds. He uses Twilight tokens to play certain cards and perform actions, and those tokens in turn represent the amount of notice the Shadow realm takes in the player's actions. These Twilight Pool tokens, in turn, become the currency an opponent uses to block a player's Fellowship phase movements.

Players win *Lord of the Rings* in three ways. The first way to win is by keeping your Ringbearer alive long enough for him to reach the end of the adventure path. You can also kill your opponent's Ringbearer or corrupt your opponent's Ringbearer so that he turns to the Shadow.

Lord of the Rings contains a host of expansions that follow the movies' flow. Expansions began with movie content and now include characters from Tolkien's trilogy who didn't actually end up appearing in the movies, such as Tom Bombadil and Goldberry. In order of release, along with number of cards per expansion, *Lord of the Rings* consists of: *Fellowship of the Ring* (365); *Mines of Moria* (122); *Realms of the Elf-Lords* (122); *The Two Towers* (365); *Battle of Helm's Deep* (128); *Ents of Fangorn* (128); *Return of the King* (365); *Siege of Gondor* (122); *Reflections* (compilation set of earlier releases plus some new cards) (64); *Mount Doom* (122); *Shadows* (266); *Black Rider* (194); *Bloodlines* (194); and the *Expanded Middle Earth Draft Box* (18), a self-contained box designed for tournament play.

With the advent of the *Bloodlines* expansion, Decipher introduced two alternate Ringbearers in Sam and Gandalf. This gives poor Frodo a rest and allows players to create new winning strategies. Even a Hobbit needs a break every now and then.

Try the game for yourself at the *Lord of the Rings* trading card game Web site (<http://lotrtcg.fanhq.com>). If *Lord of the Rings* at all interests you, download the rules, download and print a full set of sample cards, and play a few hands. Decipher also offers online play with virtual cards, where players can meet opponents from all over the world. The Web site also offers message

boards, card lists, and projected release dates for new expansions. Become a hero: Save the Fellowship and destroy the Ring.

MLB Showdown

www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=showdown/mlb
Wizards of the Coast

What do baseball fans do in the long months between seasons? True fans think about the upcoming season, talk about the seasons past, deride those they consider less than competent at the game, and exalt their heroes. In short, they experience baseball all year long, regardless of whether someone stands on that hallowed mound.

To get in on this trading-card-game take on baseball, you become the team manager. You design the team. You create the batting order. You are in charge. (Ooooooh! Can't you just smell the hot dogs and hear the crack of the bat?)

MLB Showdown makes playing America's Favorite Pastime, anytime, easy. Each year, Wizards of the Coast releases a new starter deck and booster packs, updated with current player statistics. Starters contain two 15-card decks, and each booster pack holds 11 cards. To play with up-to-date stats — not a requirement for those who enjoy the flow of the game more than its numbers — a player needs the current year's card release. Players build decks that feature their favorite players, or they attempt to assemble the best team possible to throw the strikes, field the plays, and run the bases inning after inning.

Each player's deck contains batters, pitchers, and strategy cards. A 20-sided die simulates the randomness of the pitchers and batters, and the beginning game rules are printed right on the MLB game mat that comes in the starter box. Booster cards give you more batters, pitchers, and strategy cards to play with, and each year sees a new Base Set edition along with a new Basic Set of booster cards. In addition, Wizards of the Coast releases a Trading Deadline expansion and a Pennant Run expansion for each year. Each expansion set usually contains about 150 cards.

Your deck needs a good combination of batters, pitchers, and strategy to win. Strategy cards like **Rattled**, which scores against your opponent's pitcher, or **Mind Games**, which lets you take any card from your discard pile back into your hand, help you tweak your game to go beyond hits, runs, and outs.

Check out the Web site's demo, one of the best I've seen for conveying the flavor of a trading card game in a short period. Watching the online demo is like having someone teach you the game. Also visit the Web site for complete advanced rules, a scorecard, tournament rules, and card lists.

Star Wars

www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=swtcg
Wizards of the Coast

Not so long ago, in a galaxy very close to ours, Wizards of the Coast designed a card game based on the classic epic struggle between good and evil set “Long ago.” (Several years ago, another company, Decipher, did very much the same thing. Decipher called it the *Star Wars Customizable Card Game* — see the sidebar later in this chapter for the lowdown.) With Wizards of the Coast’s *Star Wars* card game, players relive the glories of the Empire — or of the Rebellion — and endeavor to change the course of science fiction history, at least for the length of time it takes to play a game.

The Star Wars trading card game debuted in 2002. Since that time, it’s seen many expansion sets as Wizards of the Coast duplicates the *Star Wars* universe in card format. A starter set comes with two 30-card decks. Unlike many trading card games, the Wizards’ *Star Wars* game uses dice and counters in addition to the trading cards themselves. At its first release, *Star Wars* offered three rule versions: basic rules printed on the playmat, more advanced rules in the starter box that show players how to select cards, and the full rules, which incorporate Battle and Mission cards. Tournament play uses the full rule set and requires a Dark Side or Light Side deck of at least 60 cards.

Wizards of the Coast redesigned the rule book with the release of the *Revenge of the Sith* expansion set. *Revenge of the Sith* was the latest in a long line of expansions, and by that point, the rules needed more than just another tweaking; they required a complete overhaul. To their credit, Wizards of the Coast took the time to refine the rule set for *Star Wars*, just as it did with *Magic: The Gathering* when the game needed it.

With ten expansions, players have lots of room for creativity in the *Star Wars* universe. They can build decks to suit any style of play. Mix genres and battle with both podracers and Ewoks. Create a Jedi deck that takes no prisoners, or a deck heavy on mechanical content, such as droids and walkers. Players have plenty of card possibilities for almost any type of deck they’d like to try.

While you don’t need all the cards from all the expansions to play — heck, you don’t really even require all the cards from *one* expansion to build a good deck — players might want to invest in an expansion or two as they become more involved with the game. Each expansion after *Attack of the Clones* includes one or more new game mechanics that tweak gameplay, increase the power of some cards, and decrease the power levels of others. See Table 11-1 for a peek into what the various expansions can do.

<i>Expansion Set Name</i>	<i>Number of Cards in Set</i>	<i>New Game Mechanics Introduced</i>
<i>Attack of the Clones</i>	180	Introductory set establishing gameplay
<i>Sith Rising</i>	90	Stun, Overload
<i>A New Hope</i>	180	Accuracy, Intercept, and Piloting
<i>Battle of Yavin</i>	105	Retaliate
<i>Jedi Guardians</i>	105	Overkill, Reserves
<i>The Empire Strikes Back</i>	210	Armor, Enhance
<i>Rogues and Scoundrels</i>	105	Bounty, Upkeep, Neutral Cards
<i>The Phantom Menace</i>	90	Lucky
<i>Return of the Jedi</i>	110	Hidden Cost
<i>Revenge of the Sith</i>	110	Equipment

With all these options, it's easy to get caught up in the excitement of what each card can do. Combining cards and using each card's special text allow a player to build strategy into her deck. *Star Wars* allows players to stack cards, which means that different versions of unique characters (such as Darth Vader or Obi-Wan Kenobi) can stack one on top of the other and play together as a unit. Four Darth Vader cards are much more powerful than one.

Each *Star Wars* game plays in three different venues: Battles occur in space, on the ground, and character to character. Defeat an opponent in two of the three venues to win the game. Card speed is crucial; the fastest card goes first in battle, and all ties fall to the Dark Side.

A player builds cards into her space, ground, and character areas, and the number of build points required varies. Light Side players roll for build points each turn, and both players use the number rolled, from one to seven. Players spend those points to move cards from their hands to the table, building the strategy they hope will help them win the game, if the dice play along.

Sometimes cards require an investment of the Force to play them. Many Battle cards require Force, as do the Jedi character cards. Each turn played

gains four Force points; players can accumulate Force points until they need them for a Battle or Jedi card. After all, what would a *Star Wars* game be without the Force? Giving players ready access to Force points that they use at their own discretion creates a more lifelike utilization of the *Star Wars* power than if they had to draw Force cards from their decks.

A visit to the *Star Wars* Web site gives players full card lists for every expansion, a downloadable version of the revised rule book, tournament lists, and a host of articles discussing various aspects of the game. It's definitely worth a visit, especially if you want tips on building your own designer decks. May the Force be with you as you embark on the *Star Wars* journey.

Star Trek

<http://startrekccg.fanhq.com>
Decipher

Once in a while, you want to boldly go where no one's gone before. Sometimes you'd like to stay there, too, but that doesn't help you find opponents for card games. Fans of *Star Trek* and all its kin often gravitate to this game; it has its die-hard fans, its world champions, and its collectors.

Now in its second edition, *Star Trek* uses your favorite characters and situations from the television shows and movies to re-create the well-loved worlds. Ferengi, Federation, Borg, and more battle it out right there on the tabletop. May the best, er, most well-constructed race win!



If you know somebody who played the *Star Trek* game in its first edition, *some* of the new second-edition cards are playable with the old first-edition set. The reverse, alas, does not apply. Those of us still holding onto first-edition cards can't use them with the new release sets. Sad, but true.

You can find several *Star Trek* expansion sets floating in retail space. True to Decipher's history, however, not all of the expansions are true all-new card releases. Sets with titles like *Reflections* or *Anthology* are clues that they're compilation sets — groups of cards from several different expansions packaged together with 60 or so new cards. Take a look at Table 11-2 for the current list of sets.

<i>Set Name</i>	<i>Number of Cards</i>	<i>New Game Mechanic or Character Set</i>
<i>Second Edition</i>	415	The current starting point for present <i>Star Trek</i> gamers.
<i>Energize</i>	180	Maquis Faction; Kathless
<i>Call to Arms</i>	208	Gamma, Delta Quadrants; Borg; Dominion
<i>Necessary Evil</i>	180	Strategy cards for existing affiliations
<i>Fractured Time</i>	40	Events and characters that cross boundaries of time
<i>Reflections 2.0</i>	121	61 new foil cards plus a compilation of cards from earlier sets
<i>Strange New Worlds</i>	120	Ferengi become full affiliation; Androids
<i>Adversaries Anthology</i>	121	Compilation set like Reflections 2.0
<i>To Boldly Go</i>	120	Replicate; Starfleet affiliation

Although experienced players might turn up their noses at the compilation sets, these sets do provide an easy, inexpensive way for new players to amass the best cards from earlier sets that might be out of print or difficult to obtain. Plus, sets like *Reflections 2.0* contain a host of foil cards that make a cool-looking deck. Players who use several foil cards in a tournament deck might even hear a few *oohs* from others they meet during the day.

Star Trek decks require at least 60 cards, compiled from three different card types. The deck needs five different missions, no more and no less. These are the missions you need to complete as you play; some missions are space-based, while others take place on a planet. A deck also needs at least 20 dilemma cards, which provide problems for your characters to solve as they complete missions. Finally, the deck contains at least 35 other cards — ships, personnel of various affiliations, event cards, equipment, and interrupts. These cards add strategy to a deck and provide characters who complete missions and interact with equipment and other personnel.

Most players create an affiliation deck of some kind; they play a Ferengi deck or they concentrate on Starfleet. Some players experiment with specialty decks; a deck might contain all androids or contain cards specifically combined

to crush an opponent. Because *Star Trek*, in all its manifestations (TV, films, and books), allures fans through its fantastic characters and in-depth storylines, players of the *Star Trek* trading card game delight in telling those stories through their decks.

For those interested in *Star Trek*, the Web site offers a “try before you buy” feature. Download the complete updated rule book as well as a starter deck of cards you can print, cut out, and use to try the game. Those who enjoy playing with others all over the world can also play the game online through the Decipher Web site. The *Star Trek* software and the online account that you need to play online are both free, but you pay a fee to “purchase” the virtual cards you use in the game.

WWE Raw Deal

www.comicimages.com/rawdeal
Comic Images

What do you do when wrestling isn't on cable TV? How do you fill those empty hours before weekends and prime time? Those who love wrestling and all its antics thrill to *WWE Raw Deal*. It brings the excitement and personalities out of the ring and into your pocket — or onto your table, after you take the deck out of your pocket and begin to play.

Take a Superstar (**The Rock**, **Kurt Angle**, or **Dude Love**), build a deck of 60 cards around the Superstar, and get ready to enter the ring. Available card types include Actions, Maneuvers, Reversals, and Hybrids. Players use Reversals to cancel an opponent's Action or Maneuver. Hybrid cards are a mixture of two different types.

Many expansions fill the *WWE Raw Deal* lineup. Some, like the Survivor expansion sets, refine older cards from early releases. Other expansions release new Superstars in addition to unique and cool Actions, Maneuvers, and Reversals. Once in a while, *Raw Deal* releases limited-edition Superstar tins with that Superstar's starter set and a couple of foils thrown in for good measure.

Anybody can play *Raw Deal*, but the game makes more sense at the start with a good working knowledge of television entertainment wrestling, its personalities, and the terms used in the ring. Cards such as **Airplane Spin**, **Atomic Facebuster**, and **Shooting Star Press** carry more weight with mental images. Of course, you always have the option of using *Raw Deal* as the entryway to a new hobby. Then a player can pick up the terminology from the television after finding out how to play the game.

Some games are like Elvis: Dead but still popular

What do you do with a dead card game? Some people make 1-inch buttons from the images. Others use them to build card houses (complete with the little slits that hold the cards together) or to host a “how fast can you destroy a stack of cards” party, or they use favorite images to create a decoupage picture. A whole lot of folks, however, ignore the fact that the publishers declare the game dead, and they keep playing. And playing. They continue to hold unofficial tournaments, trade cards, and tell gaming stories.

Not all trading card games engender this kind of loyalty; players reserve such passion for the truly exceptional or the amazingly unique. Games like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* from Score Entertainment, Decipher’s *Star Wars*, and the ever-popular *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* from Kenzer & Company continue to draw a following — or at least a fond sigh — whenever they appear.

Campy *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* existed in three releases before the license faded into obscurity. Exploring the supernatural and engaging in battles encompass much of the game; Slayers and Vampires wander through the streets of Sunnydale trying to defeat one another with actions such as “butt-kicking,” truly a Buffy-esque mechanic.

The Decipher *Star Wars Customizable Card Game* enjoyed a huge following, spawning world tournaments, gorgeous trophies, dedicated fans, and a great card game. Then Decipher’s *Star Wars* license expired and this game, too, faded into near-obscurity. Although cards are no longer available, *Star Wars* still enjoys a devoted, albeit small, following. Players organize tournaments, trade, and talk about deck design, which is quite a commendation for a game that’s been out of print for several years. Cards are still available on the used market, or through formerly avid players who amassed huge collections while they played. Decipher’s *Star Wars* game plays very differently than its namesake published by Wizards of the Coast.

Hilarious might be the best word to describe *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Cards are difficult to find, but they’re so funny that you don’t need to play the game itself to enjoy them. The rules direct players to speak in authentic movie accents, and a player can play a Song card on his opponent, which requires the opponent to stand and sing the card’s song. Song cards include delightful little ditties such as “Brave Sir Robin” and the “Knights of the Round Table Song.” The card set also includes a Make Yer Own option, that is, blank cards for Make Yer Own Knight, Item, Castle, or Adversary. *Monty Python* is truly a customizable game.

One of *Raw Deal*’s unique features is an advanced play option called Tag Team. Tag Team play requires four to ten players or more who each design a Superstar deck. The players divide into two teams, and each team’s Superstars and Abilities have to be able to work together (the *Raw Deal* Web site gives a nice, detailed rundown of allowable combinations). Pinning or Counting Out one member of the opposing team means that your team wins the game.

See the Web site for card lists and starter box contents for each expansion. Also look for rules and articles about various aspects of the game, tournament venues, world ranking lists, and more. *Raw Deal* takes you into the heart of the wrestling entertainment world and lets you control your favorite Superstar.

Chapter 12

Living Your Dreams in Fantasy and Science Fiction Games

In This Chapter

- ▶ Tossing your way to victory with *Clout Fantasy*
 - ▶ Entering the world of *Warhammer 40K*
 - ▶ Dancing with magic in the *Final Twilight*
 - ▶ Building better monstrous, soul-sucking demons in *Hecatomb*
 - ▶ Contesting those cute, cuddly *Neopets*
 - ▶ Reliving your favorite Hong Kong movies through *Shadowfist*
 - ▶ Entering global espionage with *Spycraft*
 - ▶ Playing cards with a die, courtesy of *Warlord*
-

What do fantasy and science fiction games have in common? Their reality is based somewhere outside the world we know. That's about all they share, and this chapter proves it. Here, you find games that go everywhere from the dark, war-filled world of the future to a land where even the pets have little pets.

If the not-quite-real enchants you, you'll love some of these games. With a good fantasy or science fiction trading card game, you can battle centaurs against elves or ogres, send your super-spy into the mission prepared to knock out every enemy spy he encounters, or play a magic user who defends the defenseless — at the same time he watches his own back for a misguided mage-killer out to get him. Players who have the time and inclination could actually do all three.

Like the best of novels, these games take the player away from reality for awhile, letting him command troops of Northrogs (those things that might have been ogres in an earlier time) in *Warlord: Saga of the Storm*. Or perhaps playing the one chosen to bring about the end of the world in *Hecatomb* sounds more intriguing. The choice is yours. Dive head-first into the fantasy.

Clout Fantasy

www.cloutfantasyusa.com or www.hiddencitygames.com
Hidden City Games

Your army, a group of fierce goblins, gather round to determine who to send into the fray next. Peeking through the bushes, the **Rat Maze Warrior** spies a **Deep-Woods Hunter**, an elf known for his ability to strike fiercely. **Rat Maze Warrior** volunteers to take the Hunter by surprise and attack him, in hopes of taking the elf out and weakening the elvish forces. The goblin warrior takes leave of his cronies and flies through the air in the doomed elf's direction.

If the idea of sitting still for hours on end and playing cards on a tabletop leaves you cold, *Clout Fantasy* might fit your idea of the perfect collectible game. Rather than decks of cards, the game uses custom-printed poker chips that feature characters, actions, and places. Players toss the discs onto a flat surface and let the chips fall where they may.

One of the most unique collectible games to come along in the past few years, *Clout Fantasy* draws on both strategy skill and throwing skill. A player's strategy can destroy any opponent's army, but if he can't toss his army's chips where they need to go, his well-planned game won't work. Each army is easily identified by chip color; elves are green (of course), centaurs are purple, goblins are orange, and the undead, a happy little bunch of discs, are black.

Within each army, chips fit into one of four types: troops, bases, actions, and relics. Armies require troops to fight and a base to rally around and to provide support. Action chips, such as **Elven Flare** or **Inflict Pain**, allow armies to inflict damage. Relics, the fourth kind of chip, help an army's strategy. Possible relics might include protective gear or a particular type of weapon.

The game made a much-anticipated appearance in August 2005. In the introductory release, each of the four army sets consists of 50 chips. A fifth army, dragons, appears on gold chips and is available only in booster packs, making them much harder to collect. The dragon faction contains only 25 chips, making the entire first release total 225 chips. See Figure 12-1 for an example of the *Clout Fantasy* concept.

Figure 12-1:
Centaurs
and zombies
go head-to-
head in
the *Clout
Fantasy*
universe.



Clout Fantasy calls the pieces you play with your *stack*. A stack equals no more than 15 chips, so a fully functional playing army easily fits into a small drawstring bag or even a deep jeans pocket. With no dice to keep track of and no unwieldy playing mat to tote (the game can even be played outdoors or on the living room floor), *Clout Fantasy* features amazing portability for players who like to travel light and meet for pick-up games. Because each player chooses a specific army to play, there's no contest over whose-chips-might-be-whose when the game is over. If one player takes the purple army, because centaurs always were her favorites, and her opponent plays the green elves, at the end of the game, each player's pieces are obvious — a bonus not all earlier collectible games share.

Players as young as six tested *Clout Fantasy* during development and before its public release. Due to its strategy component, though, the game seems to work best with ages 8 through 45+. Each player selects the best chip for each throw, making the chip stack work more like a hand of cards than a deck.

A visit to the Web site provides printable rules, a peek at the artwork on the chips themselves (which, considering the tiny space available, is truly stunning on some chips), and information on tournament play. Also look here for a link to the Ultra-Pro site. Ultra-Pro manufactures gaming accessories, such as card sleeves, and they designed a line of plastic pages to organize and keep *Clout Fantasy* chips safe. Best of all, the chips stay in the pages where you put them; they don't fall out. Nice. Of course, a dice bag works too.

Dark Millenium

www.sabertoothgames.com/40k
Sabertooth Games

Enter a world of the far future, where war never ends. Rather than fighting for a country, or even a world, this time the entire galaxy's fate rests in your hands. Based on the Games Workshop miniatures game *Warhammer 40,000* (affectionately called *Warhammer 40K* by its fans), *Dark Millenium* takes the story of impending total annihilation from the miniatures table to the card table.

This game is also known as *Warhammer 40K, The Card Game, Part III*. The game released in October 2005. While most companies simply create expansion set upon expansion set to tell a game's story, Sabertooth actually ended the story of its earlier Part II game, *Horus Heresy* (see this chapter for details), and began a new chapter under the name *Dark Millenium*. *Dark Millenium's* 365 base-set cards are completely compatible with *Horus Heresy*; players can use *Horus Heresy* decks, pure *Dark Millenium* decks, or any combination of the two.

By creating *Dark Millenium*, Sabertooth managed to do a few good things for *Horus Heresy* players. First, any and all players know exactly where the story begins: Horus is dead; long live Horus. Second, releasing a new game with a concentrated storyline allows new players to get into the game near the beginning without feeling like they lost years of play value and back story. To new players, *Dark Millenium* feels like a new game. To experienced players, *Dark Millenium* feels like the next chapter. And, to top it all off, *Dark Millenium* provides a forum for complete battle range for the first time in *Warhammer 40K* card game history. Battles can take place in space or on planets as players fight for the future of the universe. Earlier games focused on planet warfare; *Dark Millenium* expands the playing field.

Dark Millenium's first release contains four factions: Armies of the Imperium, Forces of Chaos, Eldar, and Orcs. Sabertooth plans to expand armies in future releases; for example, if the game includes Eldar, sooner or later you will see the advent of Dark Eldar. Visit the Sabertooth Web site for more information, some neat screen saver downloads, and storyline information and card lists.

Final Twilight

<http://final-twilight.neoproductions.net>
Neo Productions Unlimited LLC

A young well-trained magic user named Mark roams the streets at night helping the helpless and defending the innocent in New Metropolis. Kerra, an orphaned sorcerer's daughter trained to hunt and fight mages, finds herself

in New Metropolis as part of the search for rogue sorcerers. Charles, an evil sorcerer who prizes control above all else, comes to the city seeking to advance his power and enhance his practice of the black arts. These three personalities form the basis for the drama that grips *Final Twilight*. One character fights evil, another is evil, and the third might make the wrong choice.

Although it sounds like a lark in the moonlight, Neo Productions Unlimited suggests *Final Twilight* for an “older audience” due to its language, violence, and adult themes. This game definitely isn’t for kids. The online novel that provides the back story contains quite a bit of harsh language and street violence.

Final Twilight’s first release, *Trinity* (released in Spring of 2004) offers three preconstructed starter decks, one for each character. In addition, the *Trinity Premiere Expansion 1* booster packs are preset and character-based; you purchase the booster pack that matches your starter deck. *Trinity Premiere Expansion 2*, however, contains an assortment of cards that enhance existing decks for all players.

Gameplay follows the characters from location to location as they attack Major Characters (**Charles, Kerra, Mark**) or Minor Characters (such as **Police**) and use Attachments (weapons, shields, and so on) and Spells against one another. Characters can rely on the hidden power of Relics, and they react to Events. The game’s goal is to reduce an opponent’s character’s life force to zero.

One of *Final Twilight*’s most unique aspects is how it tracks a character’s life points and resources. Some cards require spending *Moren* to activate them. *Moren*, a game term for energy or power, also functions as a character’s life total. When a player activates a card that requires *Moren* points to play, that character willingly reduces his own life total to cast the spell or complete the action. Other cards require spending *Money* to activate; each player begins the game with 15 life points and \$20. Unlike the life points, which end the game when they reach zero, a player who runs out of *Money* simply can’t play any more cards that require cash.

With preset starters and boosters, it would seem that one of each is all a player would need. Branching into another character requires a second starter and booster, but *Final Twilight* doesn’t have the nearly endless collectability of some games. The game’s Web site contains an active player message board, the *Trinity* novel that provides the game’s storyline, and extra location cards to print and add to an active deck.

The Web site offers demo cards to download and print, and the demo card packet contains 9 cards in each of two factions for a game that requires 54 cards per deck to play. (I’m not sure about their math skills at Neo Productions Unlimited.) Players can also download updated *Final Twilight* rules if they play the full game; the downloadable rules contain no abbreviated walkthrough for the demo cards, though.



For players who discover they love the game, Neo Productions Unlimited offers a design-your-own-cards service that launched in September 2005. Players can design the cards of their dreams and order them through the Divergence Web site, <http://divergence.neoproductions.net>. Got an idea for a spell that would rock the *Final Twilight* world? Design it through Divergence and then energize your deck with a few copies.

Hecatomb

www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=ht
Wizards of the Coast

Once again, the Endbringers gather as nighttime falls, knowing that this time, one of them will succeed in the ultimate goal: complete annihilation of Earth. They lust for power — for it is through power that they achieve their desire — power that comes from reaping souls and taking those souls' energy as their own. Only one Endbringer emerges from the struggle a victor; the rest meet their doom as their opponents strip souls from them.

Looking at the elements here — reaping souls, destruction of the earth, lust for power, demonic deities (oh, did I forget that part?) — this isn't a game you want to hand over to your favorite seven-year-old. Actually, the game is marked as appropriate for ages 15 and up. Fifteen might even be a little low, depending on the teen.

You gotta give the folks at Wizards of the Coast credit, though. *Hecatomb* is unique. For one thing, it's a multi-player game. Two or more players can compete simultaneously for the 20-soul total that results in world destruction. Also, the cards are clear plastic. Although shuffling them can be a bit of a trick, their transparency gives them clear edges. Players stack cards one upon the other, turning them so the edges show through the top.

Stacking cards creates Abominations, which then attack the opponent's Abomination stacks with the goal of soul reapege. Only Minion cards (beasts, demons, cultists, and the like) can be stacked. Players use Fate, Relic, and God cards to altar . . . um . . . alter gameplay and increase strategy.

Each deck contains at least 40 cards of usually two Dooms (*factions* to you and me.) Possible Dooms include Corruption, the gray cards; Deceit, which are blue; Destruction, red cards; and Greed, which are — what else? — green. Players gain advantages by stacking minions of the same Doom one upon another.

Hecatomb's base set was released in October 2005 with randomized starter sets of 40 cards. With a random starter deck, the new player can open the

box, begin playing, and actually provide some competition because the cards aren't static box to box. Due to randomization, though, not all card types appear in all starters. My starter, for example, contained no Gods, which provide key strategy to the game.

A peek at the Web site offers views of the card art, organized tournament system, and stories (which aren't for kids either, due to some adult references and the topics at hand). You can also take a quaint little quiz called What is Your Doom? It assigns quiz participants to the Doom of Corruption, Deceit, Destruction, or Greed depending on the submitted answers.

Horus Heresy

www.sabertoothgames.com/horus
Sabertooth Games

Enter the world of the far future, where war never ends. Wait . . . I said that earlier. First, Sabertooth brought us *Warhammer 40K*, the collectible card game. *Horus Heresy* is *Warhammer 40,000, The Card Game, Part II*. *Horus Heresy* tells the *Warhammer 40K* story of the Horus rebellion, up to the death of Horus. From that point on, the story becomes a card game under the name *Dark Millenium* (see its section, earlier in the chapter, for more details).

This game focuses on the time of the Horus Heresy. Warmaster Horus betrays the trust of the Emperor of Mankind, turning against him and becoming his enemy. Horus focuses his energies and his troops on the annihilation of the Imperium forces and the destruction of life as the future knows it. Civil war ensues as families and troops split their affections, siding with the Loyalists or the Traitors. In an incredibly bloody conflict, units, troops and commanders find themselves part of the carnage as the game progresses.

Released in 2003, *Horus Heresy* has much storyline and many cards behind it. It is mostly compatible with *Warhammer 40K*, the miniatures game, and completely compatible with *Dark Millenium*, the later release. *Horus Heresy* brought a new focus and updated rules to the gaming universe. Players fight to take planets with one of two factions, the Imperium forces or Warmaster Horus's army.

The game has several booster expansions under its belt; players begin with a Traitor (Horus) or Loyalist (Imperium) starter deck and customize it with boosters from the original *Horus Heresy* release or any of its expansions. With options to play only light side or dark side decks, players can concentrate on deck design and strategy.

Horus Heresy's Web site offers tournament information, card lists, rules, very swanky downloadable binder covers, a deck list to use during tournaments, explanations of play, background stories, and more. Whew! Players could occupy themselves on the site for quite awhile.

Neopets

www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=neopets
Wizards of the Coast

Once upon a time, there was a Web site. The developers called the site *Neopets* and stocked it with all kinds of things kids would like — games, coloring pages, and little furries to love and care for. This site became very popular with young humans, who enjoyed leaving notes on message boards, caring for virtual pets, and playing games of Neoskill.

Deep in the world of Neopia, the Neopets live and work and play. They keep their own little petpets (yes, Neopets' pets are actually called petpets), converse with fairies, and generally have a good time in their realm. Now they also star in their own *Neopets* magazine and the *Neopets* trading card game. Neopets have arrived.

As you probably can surmise, *Neopets* is a game for the youngsters among us. Card art is kid-friendly and colorful; card stats are easy to read, understand, and apply. In the game, Neopets fall into several types: a Neopet can be of water, air, fire, light, dark, or earth. Players use supporting cards to help their Neopets. Some cards are type-based, while others are neutral and can be used to help (or hinder) any Neopet.

Players create their decks from a starter set plus the several available expansions. Tournament decks require 50 cards per deck; 10 of those cards are Neopets, while the other 40 function as “the deck” and contain heroes, villains, equipment (such as **Rocket Boots**), petpets (like **Hasee**), items, and the popular Something Has Happened cards. Heroes and villains function as extra strategy cards to help a player win the game, while Something Has Happened game text alters the flow of the game.

With deck in hand, players enter their Neopets in contests for strength, agility, magic, and intelligence. Each Neopet, and all supporting cards, displays values for each of the four contest areas. Win a contest and place an Item or Equipment card in your Bank. The first player to bank 21 point's worth of stuff wins the game.

Interested players can visit the Web site to see a nice online game demo, card lists, and quickstart rules, as well as the regular rule set. They can also read up on strategy ideas, discover the value of including villains in their decks, and find out about upcoming booster sets.

Shadowfist

www.shadowfist.com/html/home.htm
Z-Man Games

Engage in a game of *Shadowfist* and you join an epic struggle that combines physical and spiritual realms. The battle of *Shadowfist* is a battle for important Feng Shui sites, which are areas that contain strong concentrations of chi, or life energy. This is a secret war; few know of it, and those who know don't often tell. Added to the mystery is that in the world of *Shadowfist*, the war exists throughout the ribbon of time, making it possible for characters to find themselves in the first century, today, or the near future.

Shadowfist debuted in 1995, making it one of the longest-running customizable card games available today. In an industry where card games appear and then all too many disappear into obscurity, *Shadowfist* shows staying power. Designed for a more mature audience, *Shadowfist* brings the Hong Kong–movie genre to life on the tabletop. Warlords, spies, treachery, combat — *Shadowfist* has it all.

Z-Man Games celebrated the coveted tenth anniversary by releasing a new expansion set called *Seven Masters vs. The Underworld*, which won an Origins award for the best customizable card game expansion released during 2005. Each player needs at least a 60-card starter deck to enter the game; boosters are available to enhance strategy and play. While *Shadowfist* has seen many expansions in the past ten years, several (including the 1970s *Boom Chaka Laka* theme cards, sigh) are out of print.

Players must control six Feng Shui sites to win the game. Another option is to burn for victory — while not controlled and standing, the sites still belong to the burner and count as victory points. The winning player has to control or burn for victory the last remaining Feng Shui site, which finishes the race to get six sites and ends the game.

Visit the Web site to find out more about the storyline or the game. The *Shadowfist* Web site is masterful at creating online atmosphere; visitors get a feel for the game and its world without ever picking up a card. Stories that explain the cards, card lists, tournament information, game rules, and fan fiction are all available at the *Shadowfist* Web site.

Spycraft

www.spycrafttrpg.com
Alderac Entertainment Group

Spycraft began its life as a roleplaying game, but unfortunately, not all people who play games enjoy the roleplay genre. It was never very successful. Because of its scenarios and many options, however, *Spycraft* was the perfect story to expand into the trading card game market and was met much more favorably by the gaming public. Excitement ran high when news of the pending card game trickled throughout game industry sources. Even people who'd never played *Spycraft* knew about the game. Store owners and players alike waited — well, rather impatiently, to tell the truth — for the game's first appearance.

Spycraft brings the world of global espionage to the tabletop. Former government agents band together to complete missions and attempt to “retire” other factions' spies. Figure 12-2 shows an example of a Action card. World-class agents who function as Leaders gather a group of highly trusted and capable spies, called Agents, about them. Headquarters outfits Agents with various Gear cards: vehicles, weapons, or highly specialized training. With a spy-enabled SUV and a weapon, even the lowest agent could take over the world. Of course, outfitting an agent like that might cost ya . . .

Gear Action cards provide conflict, distraction, and sometimes destruction. Adding a few to the deck helps a player's odds of winning. They also provide payment fodder so that cards more useful at the moment might move into active play. As players fight to take missions, each mission comes with its own Victory Points. Amass 20 Victory Points or permanently “retire” an opponent's highest- (fourth-) level Leader Agent to win the game.

Spycraft's original card set, *Operation: Nightfall*, was released in 2004 with 344 cards. Starter sets come with 84 cards in one of five factions: The Banshee Net, Bloodvine Syndicate, The Krypt, Nine Tiger Dynasty, and Shadow Patriots. Faction cards are color-coded, which helps to identify them — especially in the booster packs. Each starter deck comes with a full set of Mission cards. (In addition, the Web site offers all Mission cards in downloadable format so you can print and use the entire Mission deck from the site if you like.) *Spycraft* has at least three expansions already out, with more planned in the near future.

Spycraft also comes packaged in a *Shadow Academy Learn-to-Play* box. A very nice presentation, the two-player box contains 144 preset and reshuffled

cards (two decks plus a missions deck), counters, and *Shadow Academy Learn-to-Play* rules (along with complete rules). Because the cards are preset and prearranged, all the players need to do is follow the multipage demonstration in the rulebook. The Learn-to-Play rules walk the new player through the first complete turn while using actual cards and a real hand, a very nice touch. Perhaps best of all, the *Shadow Academy* box provides lots of space to store a new player's future card collection.



Figure 12-2: Hassle your opponent by relieving him of his Gear with the Security Check card.

For more information about *Spycraft*, or to download rules, look at tournament information, or investigate the storylines of the *Spycraft* role-playing game, visit the Web site. You can also download two demo decks and try the game yourself (look in the Resources part of the Card Game section of the site). If you like the game, look for the player-designed color tokens that you can print and use to mark an agent wounded, exposed, and so on. A set of black-and-white tokens come with the starter sets, but the printable set is very useful on its own.

WarCry

www.sabertoothgames.com/warcry
Sabertooth Games

WarCry is the paper incarnation of the popular and long-lasting *Warhammer Fantasy* miniatures game. Note that *Warhammer Fantasy* and *Warhammer 40K* are two different miniatures games. Although *WarCry* draws from the vast *Warhammer* universe, it has the freedom to create its own characters and events as well. This makes for a game that has a life of its own, and doesn't seem too tightly tied to a static storyline.

The Grand Alliance, made up of Elves, Dwarves, and the Empire, faces off against The Hordes of Darkness — Dark Elves, Orcs, Goblins, and Chaos. The world they know is broken by war, and someone will become the victor. Whether The Grand Alliance or The Hordes of Darkness clutch that honor changes with each hand played. Magic changes the way the world works, of course, so wizards and other magic users play an important part in *WarCry*. Various expansion sets introduce war machines, vampires, witch hunters, and more.

WarCry appeals to the fantasy lover. Some of the cards showcase stunning artwork, and the card backgrounds are color-coded to ease players' ability to design an Alliance army or a Darkness deck. Downloadable introductory gameplay rules fit onto one sheet of paper, so following the flow of the game looks simple rather than intimidating. While the cards' art definitely qualifies as fantasy-style artwork, everything is relatively teen-friendly.

One of the neat twists to *WarCry* is that players actually help finish the scenario stories that become part of the game lore. Sabertooth keeps track of tournament wins and losses when the company begins a new story line, and whichever faction wins overall through tournament play determines the outcome of the story. Very cool.

Players use 60-card decks, which they enhance with various booster cards; *WarCry* is a game that develops through its booster releases, so a cursory booster collection is almost a must if players wish to remain current with the game. When *WarCry* first appeared, for example, it contained no magic cards. The designers wanted to keep the card set to 180 cards, which was impossible with the inclusion of spells and spell-casters. Thus, the first expansion included magic cards and magic rules within its scope.

WarCry first appeared in early 2003, so in trading card game terms, it's still a relatively new game. The Web site contains a lot of story and card material, though, so it feels like a game that players have enjoyed for many years. Part

of that is due to the well-developed *Warhammer Fantasy* storyline, but much of it is because of the storyline creation fostered through the Web site. The player who arrives with decks designed to play through the current plotline is more personally involved than the one who shows up to play yet another round of a favorite game.

Drop into the *WarCry* Web site for rules, stories, gorgeous card art samples, message boards, and — of course — tournament information and location assistance. Players can even submit card ideas if they think the current sets require a bit of tweaking. One very nice feature of the *WarCry* Web site: It offers downloadable easy-start rules along with two downloadable starter decks (light and dark, totaling 30 cards each) as well as a downloadable booster deck to flesh out the printable starter decks. Look for them in the Misc. section of the Downloads area.

Warlord: Saga of the Storm

www.warlordccg.com
Alderac Entertainment Group

The hundred-year restraining order comes to an end. The Elves attack again, with a vengeance, leaving nothing but destruction in their wake. On the other side of the lands, in an area long given to isolationism and peaceful trade, the savage Northrogs attack and overtake the city, taking advantage of its detachment from the rest of society. Thus the Storm begins as the remaining humans band together to become the Free Kingdoms. They pledge to fight any and all Warlords they meet in the struggle to maintain their freedom.

Thus begins the tale of *Warlord: Saga of the Storm*. Each battle takes place between two of five factions: the Free Kingdoms, the Northrog, the Deverenians, the Dwarves (see Figure 12-3), or the Elves. Every player is the ruler of a kingdom, fighting to keep an upper hand and defeat the enemy. When a player's Warlord dies, that player loses the game.

Each player approaches a *Warlord* game with a deck of at least 50 cards. Most players begin with a legion's starter deck and then add booster cards to alter strategic impact. Choices abound for possible starter decks; several expansions included new starters decks in addition to booster packs.

Each expansion set introduces new game mechanics — stronger supporting cards or new Warlords, for example. Table 12-1 shows the various expansions and the important mechanics available through that set.



Figure 12-3:
This Dwarf
wields a
shield for
protection.

Table 12-1 Warlord: Saga of the Storm Expansion Sets

<i>Expansion Set</i>	<i>Number of Cards</i>	<i>New Game Mechanic</i>
<i>Assassin's Strike</i>	108	Guild Masters that allow faction mixing
<i>Good and Evil</i>	162	New monsters, new Action cards
<i>Tooth and Claw</i>	162	Astral and Ethereal monsters
<i>Nest of Vipers</i>	108	Magic Resistance, Rituals
<i>Black Knives</i>	310	Second Edition Basic Set
<i>Siege</i>	158	Build Fortresses, Urban Fighting, and City Siege
<i>Call to Arms: Power</i>	300	Wizards and Spells, Rogue Weapons
<i>Call to Arms: Glory</i>	150	Cards for Fighters and Clerics

<i>Expansion Set</i>	<i>Number of Cards</i>	<i>New Game Mechanic</i>
<i>Betrayal</i>	158	Betrayal, dual-front wars
<i>Dominance</i>	158	Support for less popular factions
<i>Southern Kingdoms</i>	158	Monks, Southside of Every Faction
<i>Campaign Edition</i>	450	New starter decks
<i>Sneak Attack</i>	158	Immediate attacks
<i>Counterattack</i>	158	Attacks during discard
<i>Death's Bargain</i>	158	Card Regeneration
<i>Hero's Gambit</i>	158	Enhances character positioning

For a game that was released in 2001, *Warlord: Saga of the Storm* has seen quite a number of expansion sets. Some sets are marked as good for beginners, such as the original *Saga of the Storm* sets, *Black Knives* starters, and the two-player *Learn-to-Play Battle Box*. The *Learn-to-Play Battle Box* includes two 50-card starters — a Northrog deck and a Free Kingdoms deck — a playmat that illustrates card placement, and a really well-done rule book. The rule book spends several pages telling a pull-you-in storyline that makes you want to grab the cards, place them into position on the mat, and go after those cut-throat Northrogs! Well, at least it did for me.

In addition, the *Learn-to-Play Battle Box* gives new players lots of room to store their cards in cardboard channels designed for them. A nice, inexpensive deck-storage option for the beginner, the *Learn-to-Play Battle Box* solves the problem of cards littering the floor or falling off the table . . . stuff that never happens at *my* house. One thing the *Battle Box* does not do: It doesn't give you the entire rule set. It gives you enough rules to get you started, but for additional rules needed for tournament play, players should check a regular starter deck or the Web site. Tournament rules and regular rules are downloadable from the site.

Also check the site for *Warlord* fiction, event news, card lists, and artwork. A couple of incredibly cool things in the Resources section that you won't want to miss are printable maps of the Accordlands, where the fighting takes place, and special decks designed by the Alderac Entertainment staff — including notes on how to win with the deck and how to modify it. Players can also download six desktop images for their computers to make their computer screens *Warlord*-friendly.

A Warhammer by any other name

Three of the card games in this chapter were taken from one miniatures game. *Dark Millennium*, *Horus Heresy*, and *WarCry*, developed by Sabertooth Games, all base their stories on a miniatures game called *Warhammer*. Lest you think two companies share storylines freely and without argument, Sabertooth Games is actually a division of Games Workshop. To be more accurate, Games Workshop (nicknamed GW) owns 85 percent of Sabertooth.

To understand the pull (which is huge) of Games Workshop and *Warhammer*, you have to start the story in the United Kingdom. GW began by publishing a gaming magazine and importing American games to sell in its Games Workshop stores. It also sold little plastic miniatures. In the early 1990s, GW decided to concentrate on the miniatures and drop everything else.

Unlike the collectible miniatures games by WizKids and Sabertooth (*HeroClix* and *Lord of the Rings Miniatures*), the GW miniatures have to be constructed piece-by-piece. Players need to construct enough minis so that they have a decent army — often 100 figures strong. Then they need to be painstakingly painted so they all match. This means hours upon hours of sanding, gluing, painting, and re-repainting. Often, they don't turn out quite right the first or second time, so players repaint the little guys until they get just the look they want. It is, after all, your *army* we're talking about here. It's not quite your life, but, well, it's close.

Who has the time for all this work? Exactly! Young adults (with or without very patient significant others) and teens. *Dark Millennium*, *Horus Heresy*, and *WarCry* all evolved from miniatures games designed to sell to teenage boys in the U.K. By the time a guy hits age 16, Games Workshop U.K. considers him to be moving out of the game market.

And what a market it is. Mention "game" to anyone in or from the United Kingdom, and the listener is likely to say, "Oh! You play GW?" GW means Game Store in the U.K. After visiting a couple GW stores in their native country, I can tell you — Games Workshop stores are gorgeous, and their staffs are lively and excited about what they do. When GW brought *Warhammer* to the United States, it brought that excitement with it. *Warhammer* is very popular and is played by lots of people.

Everyone, however, doesn't have the free time to sand, glue, and paint over and over. Releasing the *Warhammer* games in trading card game format allowed a whole new section of the game-loving public to involve themselves in the *Warhammer* world. Now they can play *Warhammer* and *Fantasy*, too, without getting glue on their fingers or paint on the table.

Now you know.

Chapter 13

Exploring History and Literature with Cards and Dice

In This Chapter

- ▶ Watching history’s heroes duke it out in *Anachronism*
 - ▶ Will you answer the *Call of Cthulhu*?
 - ▶ Playing with nobility in *A Game of Thrones*
 - ▶ Conspiring your way to victory in *Illuminati: New World Order*
 - ▶ Taking over the night (and the world) in *Vampire: The Eternal Struggle*
-

There’s something about history that just begs for someone to take notes. There’s something about literature that feels so, so, well, *old*. And there’s something about both topics that inspires the hearts, minds, and Marketing Departments of countless companies across the globe. Time after time, they release games that attempt to capture (in 2-D form) the glory and majesty of everything from the London of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* to the Rome of Julius Caesar — that’s the historical man in this case, not Shakespeare’s dramatic play.

Very few historical or literature-based card games survive their first brush with reality. Despite that, the games listed in this chapter *did* make the cut because they earned it with fun gameplay. Some, like *Anachronism*, take only a few seconds to learn. Others, such as *Vampire: The Eternal Struggle*, demand much more of your time and energy. (They might even make your significant other a bit jealous.)



If you want to mix a little culture with your cards, feel free to check out the games below — but do keep in mind that some sections of history don’t make very good reading for the kids, which is why you need to step lightly through the “mature content” minefield. Don’t worry, though; this book gives you some great overviews along with plenty of tips on what to avoid. Enjoy your cultured journey of a lifetime!

Anachronism

www.trikinggames.com

TriKing Games/The History Channel

What if, for no adequately explained reason, the greatest warriors in all of history, from Joan of Arc to Crazy Horse, — complete with their gear, sidekicks, and other legendary accoutrement — suddenly dropped out of the sky and found themselves standing together in an arena? Well, in addition to wondering what the heck just happened, no doubt they'd challenge each other in order to prove who was the greatest fighter of them all. Yeah!

Apart from the need to invent an animé-style explanation of the time rift — maybe a demonic centipede bit the warriors and sent them back in time . . . no, the *Inuyasha* trading card game already claimed that plot complication — *Anachronism* delivers some new interpretations of the trading card game concept.

At first glance, *Anachronism* looks just like a classic trading card game. To get going in the game, you purchase either one of the premade starter sets or one of several warrior packs. The warrior packs contain a *fixed* assortment of cards, so all of the “Spartacus” packs give you exactly the same cards. You might purchase multiple copies of the same warrior packs in order to get spares of that warrior’s support cards, but most of the time you only need a single copy of each warrior pack. That keeps the game’s cost low because the company releases only 16 to 18 warrior packs in each set.

When you break out your cards and start playing, *Anachronism* takes on a whole different feeling — very different from a traditional trading card game. First, the cards themselves feel much thicker than regular cardstock, and every card features gorgeous foil artwork. The thickness doesn’t affect the play (you never need to shuffle the cards, and they still fit in regular card sleeves just fine) because your warrior “stack” only contains five cards: a single warrior, plus four support cards. A game only takes about five minutes, so you can always squeeze multiple rounds of play into a single session.

Next, there’s the battlefield. Instead of tossing your cards around on a table, you play the game on a board with a large 4x4 grid. This makes the gameplay less like cards and more like miniatures, similar to one of the “clix” games I discuss in Chapter 15. *Anachronism* simulates an arena duel between two individuals, and the limited board size ensures that nobody tries to win by running away. (Imagine a top-down view of two people in a room for a pretty good idea of what the *Anachronism* board looks like during a game.)

You start a game by rolling two dice to determine who goes first. Whoever rolls the lower number places his warrior somewhere on the starting row. Then, the high roller places her warrior somewhere on the opposite starting row. Instead of shuffling the remaining cards, the players look at the four

support cards and place them in order face-down behind the starting area. This step forms a key part of the game's strategy because you play the support cards in the order in which you put them onto the table. No swapping card positions!

At the beginning of each turn, the players simultaneously flip over the left-most face-down support card. The support card determines who goes first on this turn, plus it provides a special ability or game-altering rule of some kind.

From there, the battle looks like a traditional miniatures game. You move your warrior card in the grid, trying to get close enough to your opponent that you can attack. Pay close attention to where your card faces (which way it points) because the warriors can attack only in certain directions. If your opponent maneuvers herself into one of your warrior's blind spots, you can't attack until you move!

To win the game, you must either reduce your opponent's character to zero life points or have the most life points left at the end of the fifth turn (assuming both characters hang in there that long).

TriKing sponsors tournament events at game stores all over the world. Find one near you by checking the retail locator on the Web site.

Call of Cthulhu

www.cthulhuccg.com
Fantasy Flight Games, Inc.

In the beginning (well, back in 1906), there was a teen-aged boy named Howard Phillips Lovecraft, a used Remington typewriter, a stack of paper, and an imagination fueled by loneliness, illness, science, chemistry, and voracious reading. Over the next 31 years, H. P. Lovecraft wrote everything from poetry to news stories, plus a small mountain of hand-written correspondence. But his most-remembered works involve the foreboding mysteries surrounding Cthulhu, the monstrous high priest of Great Old Ones, who waits in his house at the corpse city of R'lyeh, "dead but dreaming" (to both paraphrase and quote Mr. Lovecraft).



If phrases like "monstrous high priest" and "corpse city" didn't give it away already, I'll say this straight out: The *Call of Cthulhu* trading card game ain't for kids — at least not if you want them sleeping in their own beds at night. The cards feature artwork rich enough to inspire a year's worth of checking under the bed and the occasional bout of "something's drooling in the closet." Take a look through the Web site (and some of the art samples in Figure 13-1) and peruse the cards in a starter deck before making up your mind and getting your kids into the game. After all, you know your kids (and their fears) the best.

Figure 13-1:

Call of Cthulhu's artwork brings H. P. Lovecraft's gothic horror visions to life.



The *Call of Cthulhu* trading card game — its title comes from Lovecraft's 1926 short story of the same name — throws players into the 1930s as it looks through the lenses of pulp horror fiction. It's a world populated by brave investigators, devoted cultists, curious college professors, and a variety of hidden horrors, where secrets abound and insanity lurks around the next corner (and possibly under the basement floor).

The gameplay centers around the Story Deck, a stack of cards that portray the curious environs and the strange stories in Lovecraft's world. To win the game, you need to either win three stories or run your opponent's deck out of cards.

Playing the game feels a lot like reading the plotline of a Lovecraft-style story. Fantasy Flight's game really captures the major components of his fiction, letting you take part in spinning a horrific Cthulhu tale of your own.

Your playable deck contains a mix of Character cards, Support cards, and Event cards. Most of the cards belong to one of the game's seven factions, but a few remain neutral. A card's faction affects the game in some interesting ways. Every player also gets three Domain cards. These aren't really a part of your playable deck. Think of them like batteries. They represent a limit on what you can do during a turn. You can attach resources to them to "power up," enabling you to purchase more valuable cards later in the game. You'll learn more about how to do that in a moment.

Character cards fill the bulk of the deck. They include both the people and the monsters that populate the stories. Support cards add new abilities to your characters. They usually attach directly to a Character card instead of standing alone on the table. Finally, the Event cards throw plot twists into the tales of the game by temporarily canceling a card's special abilities, by sending Character cards to the discard pile, or by changing the requirements of the current story.

Before playing the game, you and your opponent agree on a set of Story cards and then build your respective decks. (Knowing the Story cards first helps you build a deck capable of handling the weird twists that the stories throw at you by turning them to your advantage.)

During the game, you build up resources and then use them to bring spooky Characters — like **Dead but Dreaming**, seen in Figure 13-2 — and other cards into play. You attempt to win stories by cleverly assigning your characters, attaching Support cards, and twisting things with Events. In the process, your characters might get killed or go insane, but that’s what happened to most of Lovecraft’s creations, too.



Figure 13-2:
Dead but Dreaming — not the kind of person you’d want to meet in a dark alley.

Resources make up one of the more interesting parts of the game. Once during each turn, you can take a card from your hand and turn it into a resource by attaching it to one of your three Domain cards. Every card behind a Domain counts as one resource toward paying for some other card. But here’s the twist: In order to pay for a card, at least one of the resources that pays for it must belong to the same faction. That little requirement ensures

that your decks focus on just one or two factions, which helps maintain the Lovecraft-themed storyline of groups working together when their purposes align for a moment.

The game spans a number of starter and booster sets, along with several booster-only expansions. Check the game's Web site for the most up-to-date information on the current base set. The site also contains a searchable tournament database and discussion areas for swapping deck designs (and the occasional tale of terror) with fellow players.

A Game of Thrones

www.agameofthrones.com
Fantasy Flight Games, Inc.

How do you even begin capturing the depth and breadth of a massive series like George R. R. Martin's epic fantasy *A Song of Fire and Ice* in a collectible card game? I sure don't know. Apparently, the folks at Fantasy Flight Games figured it out because *A Game of Thrones* doesn't just show you the world of the Seven Kingdoms, it puts you squarely into the action.

Five great Houses fight for control of the Iron Throne. In the world, summer is fast fading into winter — and winter will last for four decades. Threats abound outside the Seven Kingdoms, with the most serious coming from an army of the dead preparing for a bitter attack in the coming cold. But treachery and conflict already divide from within as Eddard of the House Stark and Cersi of the House Lannister (shown in Figure 13-3) challenge each other for the right to govern the lands. This isn't some light and fluffy fantasy world. It reminds you more of an unblinking documentary that shows everything, no matter how grim or cruel it might look.

This world of tension, danger, power, and blood forms the background to *A Game of Thrones*. The book series focuses on power, so winning the card game takes power as well. You get power in the game by winning challenges against your opponent's House. After you collect 15 power points (or 20 power points if you use one of the Alliance cards from the starter deck), you defeat your opponent and win the game.

Your deck in *A Game of Thrones* is divided into the Plot deck and the House deck. The Plot deck always contains exactly seven Plot cards — no more, no less. The House deck holds everything else in the game, including Characters, Locations, and Events. Each player also needs at least 15 counters to track power during the game.

Figure 13-3:
The leaders
of the
Houses
Stark and
Lannister
come in two
of the
starter
decks.



Each turn begins with the players selecting a Plot card. You don't randomly grab a card for this step — you pick up your Plot deck and decide which of your Plot cards works best in the current situation, just as the characters in the story adjust their plots and ploys to meet the needs of the moment. Both players reveal their Plot cards at the same time.

Plot cards really set the foundation for your plans in a round. The card's Initiative number determines which player gets to choose who goes first. Its Income value sets the base amount of gold you receive in a round. The Claim value comes into play during the Challenges phase and shows how much damage the winner of the challenge inflicts on the loser. Finally, each card also includes rules text, which comes into play for this round only. Picking the right Plot card really can make or break your turn, so choose wisely.

After playing the Plot card, the players draw two cards from their decks (if you run out of cards, you draw nothing, but the game continues) and begin the Marshalling phase. Here, you use the gold provided by your Plot card and your Locations, Characters, and Attachments (plus any Events that come into play) to play cards from your hand. After you finish, the Challenge and Dominance phases of the turn begin.

In the Challenge phase, your House may conduct one Military, one Intrigue, and one Power challenge against your opponent. A Military challenge attempts to kill the opponent's characters. Losing an Intrigue challenge

makes the opponent discard cards from his hand. A Power challenge tries taking power directly from your opponent's House, which brings you closer to victory. You announce the type of Challenge and the target of your Challenge and then assign your attacking characters. Your opponent responds by picking some defenders, if he wishes. After resolving the challenge, you inflict damage or win power according to the Claim value of your Plot card for this round.

After both players resolve their challenges, the Dominance phase happens. The players total up the Strength value of all the unused characters on the table, and the player with the most remaining strength automatically gets one power point. Granted, it adds insult to injury if your characters dropped like flies during the challenges, but nobody said that power struggles were fair.

A Game of Thrones already offers multiple base sets plus quite a number of expansions. You might need to look harder for the older sets, but that's half the fun of collecting the cards. Check the game's Web site for details about both the current card sets and the variety of past releases.

The site also covers the normal things as well — a retail store locator, discussion groups, strategy articles, and the obligatory designer log. You can also find out how to support the game by becoming a local volunteer in your area. If you love the game, volunteering makes a great way to help things grow and find new opponents!

Illuminati: New World Order (INWO)

www.sjgames.com/inwo/
Steve Jackson Games, Inc.

Do you love a good conspiracy? Does the mere whiff of secrecy and sedition set your brain spinning with possibilities? Have you ever *seen* an orbital mind control laser? (No, of course not — or at least nobody *remembers*. They selectively erase our brains to keep us in the dark!)

Rumors of the Illuminati — a secret, world-ruling cabal — circulated for the last century or more in obscure books and whispered stories. Most of the conspiracy tales point back a couple hundred years to a Bavarian man named Adam Weishaupt, who started a group he called the Illuminati. Of course, in true conspiracy form, many people think that Weishaupt was merely a front-man directed by yet another secretive group to obscure their activities. Then again, some say the Illuminati is actually a branch of Freemasonry. And what about the people who believe that Illuminati started the rumors about the Freemasons starting the Illuminati? (Heck, this little chunk of text might

appear on a Web site someday as “proof” of some bizarre link between my publisher and those men in black standing outside my window right now.)

You can turn the tables on the whole conspiracy-theory realm when you take over the world in *Illuminati: New World Order*, known to its devotees as *INWO*. *INWO* is based on an old stand-alone Illuminati card game also by Steve Jackson Games. The vitality of the brand is a testament to the popularity of the game. Each player in the game takes the role of a single Illuminati group, from the Adepts of Hermes (representing the Illuminati’s mystical side) to the Servants of Cthulhu (which we *hope* doesn’t exist in real life). Each group has its own special abilities, victory conditions, and differing amounts (and types) of power in the world.

During the game, your Illuminati faction extends its power by taking over some of the seemingly “normal” groups out there. After gaining control, they direct those groups to take over other groups, and so on, until the world belongs to you! For instance, the Illuminati sect called The Gnomes of Zurich loves corporations and banking, so they get a bonus for controlling powerful groups of those types. In a game, the Gnomes might control the Liquor Companies, which (thanks to their wads of cash) control Big Media, which then controls Comic Books and Science Fiction readers. See? The gameplay even *sounds* like a conspiracy theory! Figure 13-4 shows a favorite from one game, in which the Libertarians directed the United Nations, who gave orders to the Eco-Guerillas, who then manipulated Al Gore into taking over Canada! Sometimes, the game makes you want to laugh like an evil genius.



Although *INWO* counts as a trading card game because it comes in starters and boosters (available that way directly from Steve Jackson Games and at a select number of game stores), *INWO* doesn’t act like a typical trading card game. For instance, all of the players draw cards from a pair of shared decks instead of bringing their own finely-tuned decks. You might trade cards with your friends but mainly just to get cards that you don’t already own or just to pick up a few spares of your favorites.

Instead of collecting the cards by opening multiple booster packs, I highly recommend buying *INWO: The One With Everything*, a set that contains one of, well, everything in *INWO*. Best of all, it comes in a neat box that actually holds everything *and* looks different than all of the other card boxes in your life, so you know where to find it.

The company released several *INWO* products, including a base set (with the obligatory starter and booster), the unusual complete boxed set mentioned above, a booster-only set called *Assassins*, and the *SubGenius* expansion (which plays by itself or with *INWO*). You can also buy blanks that match the game’s artwork so that you can add your own insights to the ever-growing conspiracy.



Figure 13-4: As the Illuminati expand their power, strange (and entertaining) combinations often appear.

Vampire: The Eternal Struggle (V:TES)

www.white-wolf.com/vtes
White Wolf Publishing, Inc.

Vampires are real. They live among us, walk among us, and enjoy our company — in the same sense that we enjoy hanging around a buffet table. But feeding doesn't dominate vampires the way that fictional stories make it appear. Instead, the politics, conspiracies, and power struggles of their world consume them. (After all, when you're immortal, what's more fun than a nice game of "world domination" spread across the centuries, with other vampires as the pieces?)



Like the *Call of Cthulhu* trading card game (mentioned earlier in this chapter), *Vampire: The Eternal Struggle* (*V:TES* for short) targets an older demographic in their late teens and early 20s. It's rich in story, plot, blood, complexity, and innuendo . . . definitely not for the little ones. White Wolf, the game's creator, takes inspiration from sources of Vampire lore everywhere, from Bram Stoker to Anne Rice.

In *V:TES*, you play the part of a so-called “Methuselah,” one of the ancient vampires. Your history goes back so far that the younger vampires consider you mere legend, like bedtime stories told to the “newly-embraced” — the term vampires use to describe the making of a new vampire. But you are real — very real — and your machinations run deep in the worlds of vampires and men, like strong, dark, deadly ocean currents.

Those young ones walk proud and tall in their ignorance and imagined power. Well, let them. Pride blinds, but a blind pawn still fights, especially when it thinks that it's a king. And that suits my purposes very nicely indeed . . .



When *V:TES* was first published, it was released by Wizards of the Coast as *Jyhad*. You may see cards available for the game with *Jyhad* printed on the backs of the cards rather than *Vampire: The Eternal Struggle*. This is okay! You can play with these cards mixed in your deck with *V:TES* cards. Many long-time players do. Your goal in the game involves increasing your power by destroying the influence held by your rivals. To do this, you influence young vampires to do your bidding. A pool of counters (known as a *Blood Pool*) represents each player's influence. When your supply of counters runs out, you have no influence left — it's time to return to your lair and ponder your stealthy return during the next hundred years of schemes and conspiracies.

You play *V:TES* with two decks: the Crypt and the Library. The Crypt deck holds the vampires you hope to control during the game. The Library contains everything else, including Master cards, Minion cards, and Event cards.

During the course of the game, you expend your influence to recruit a group of minions — younger vampires — who follow your instructions. Most of the action in the game happens between these minions as they fight to preserve and expand your power. You assign them to a task by turning the cards sideways (“tapping” them, in the game player's lingo).

It's also possible for the Methuselaha to attack each other by doing a “bleed” and assigning a minion to the task. Successfully bleeding one of your opponents gives you possession of the marker called *the Edge*, which grants you some limited extra powers each turn.



Of all the games on the market, *V:TES* deserves awards for both longevity and complexity. It's one of very few games that date from about the same time as *Magic: The Gathering*, yet is still played and supported actively today. It also contains more icons, arcane terms, and specialized actions than any four or five normal games. Learning *V:TES* takes time and effort. Getting *really* good at it demands huge amounts of time to understand the game's back story and meta-game strategies. If you want a game that you can sink your teeth into and take a good bite out of, give *V:TES* a try.

The game's Web site offers all of the information you anticipate from a company like White Wolf, including a massive card FAQ, information on each release (some of which went out of print years ago), a retail locator, and tournament details. You can even walk through a simple demonstration game online to see the cards in action before spending your hard-earned money.

Chapter 14

Playing by Age: Games for Kids to Grown-ups

In This Chapter

- ▶ Opening with a few questions
 - ▶ Starting the kids with something appropriate
 - ▶ Teasing tweens with story and power
 - ▶ Deepening the complexity for older players
 - ▶ Brushing against the darkly weird side of gaming
-

Before I had children of my own, I never truly appreciated the humor behind Garrison Keillor's famous quote about Lake Wobegon, namely that "all the children are above average." Now that three kids of a variety of ages inhabit my world, that line gets funnier every single day. Of *course* my children are above average. Whose aren't?

Of course, picking games for such amazing children puts me in a dilemma sometimes. Do I go by their ages, their interests, their reading levels, or some mystical divination method like asking them what sounds cool? Questions like these nip at the heels of many parents out there — and that's why I included this chapter in the book.

The following pages take you on a quick walk through the happy task of picking a new collectible game. Whether you want a hobby for yourself, a pastime for the kids, or something that you and yours can do together, the information below helps you find a game that's the right match.



Before buying anything, definitely work through the questions in the chapter's first section. Every time I ignore a bad answer to one of those questions, I end up as the proud owner of a Truly Dead Collectible Game (such as the old *Tomb Raider* CCG or the utterly forgettable *James Bond 007* game). Don't let this happen to you or your pocketbook!

Asking a Few Opening Questions

When picking out a game for you or your child, enlist the local game store's help. Ask them plenty of questions — after all, they're your handy-dandy game experts. They know (or at least *should* know) their product lines. It's in their best interest to help you connect with the right game and, hopefully, continue connecting your credit card with their store.

As you stand at the counter, looking over box after box of collectible games, it's hard to come up with a good starting point. At moments like this, it pays to go back to the basics. Ask the following basic questions about the games that catch your eye on the store's shelves:

- ✔ **What's the manufacturer's suggested age range for the game?** Most companies do a good job describing the age requirements for their games. Combine that information with what you know about yourself or your kids to make the best match.
- ✔ **Am I looking for a game with media tie-ins?** Given our media-saturated world, a large number of children's games grow out of television shows. If you or your child love a particular show, use that as a starting point to get yourself off the couch or to redirect your child's interest and attention in new directions. Research the game market (and cruise through this book) to see what shows have matching card games.
- ✔ **Is there local support for any of these games?** Which games do people in your city actually play? In some cases, there's a big difference between games that the local stores carry versus games that the stores support with demonstrations, tournaments, and other events. If a store sells a game but doesn't support it, then the game might not last long enough to make it a worthwhile purchase.

Look for games with an active local player base. The more people who play the game, the more potential partners you have for trading and playing. At the same time, ask about the player base's age level — particularly if you want a new hobby of your own. One of my friends fell in love with *Yu-Gi-Oh!* but got the shock of his life at the first tournament he attended; none of the players were more than a third of his age.

- ✔ **What style of play does my child prefer?** Some games leave players working independently, while others pit players in lots of direct my-move-counters-your-move action. You know your kid's temperament, so make sure that the game you get matches that style of playing. Not everybody enjoys an in-your-face game experience. Regardless of the game's theme and popularity, if the actual play experience feels uncomfortable to you or your child, then it just won't work.



Whenever possible, get a demonstration of the game. Nothing beats actually holding the cards and walking through the game steps when selecting something new. When shopping for a child's game, take your little one along and involve her in the demonstration. That time lets you see firsthand how your child reacts to the game. You can observe the difference between smiles, giggles, pouts, and boredom. Try the game, watch your child, and listen to your gut instincts.

Beginning with the Basics for Kids

Buying games for your kids takes more than just nipping down to the local store and picking up whatever looks new and inviting. Sure, you might find an okay game that way, but you'll probably miss one that better matches your child's interests and developmental level and gets better support from the local player community.

Among games aimed primarily at children aged 10 and under, both *Pokémon* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* still rule. *Pokémon* (shown in Figure 14-1) appeals a little more to the younger side of that crowd, while *Yu-Gi-Oh!* leans more toward the higher age segment. Both games rely heavily on their matching TV shows to keep interest alive and recruit new players. But as long as those shows keep drawing an audience, you can bet that the card games will find new players. You can read more about *Pokémon* in Chapter 6. Chapter 8 covers *Yu-Gi-Oh!* in depth.

DuelMasters reaches kids through its larger-than-life approach to everything from card power (something with 13,000 power points just *has* to be powerful) to set titles (the *Epic Dragons of Hyperchaos* set still earns my love for finding a way to combine a classical term like *epic* with the Internet-generation prefix *hyper*). Look carefully for local interest with this game, though, because it's most popular only in a few pockets around the country.



Kid's games also make a fertile ground for bargain-basement game testing. If you aren't sure whether your kids will really enjoy a collectible game, look for a child-oriented trading card game that's on the way out. You can pick up starter sets — and even entire booster displays — of dead or dying games for pennies on the dollar. The summer conventions make great places to grab deals on these games. Look for booths that specialize in out-of-print card games (or, to be kind, “games suffering from waning popularity”).



Revving Up the Story for Tweens

Tweens — named for the “in-between” nature of life from ages 10 to 14 — want more from a game than a mere connection to a TV show. They revel in having more control over their games, more power, more strategy, and more story. Although some young players go straight from the games of their youth into “adult” games like *Magic: The Gathering*, many prefer some intermediary steps before diving headlong into the world of high competition.

For this age range, look for games that offer new strategic depth. For instance, *Anachronism* gives players control over a classic figure from history or legend in an arena-style duel. The strategy comes from Hero and Support cards each player chooses, the order of the Support cards, the combinations that the Support cards form, and the way each player invests her action points during the turn. Yet for all of its depth and action, the game still plays in just five to ten minutes — the perfect length to fit into a busy tween’s life.

Media tie-in games like *Dragon Ball GT* and *Zatch Bell* work well at this age range. Both games feature lots of heroic-size action along with the occasional tongue-in-cheek moment. *Zatch Bell*’s innovative “spell book” mechanic particularly grabs tweens because it gives them so much control over their plans

for the game. It's one thing to pick a group of cards that you think will work well together, but it's altogether different when you can pick your deck's precise order. Whichever anime series your young adult enjoys, look for a matching game in your local store.



Tween tastes change direction like a leaf in a tornado, so don't invest heavily in any particular title until yours settles into it over a long period of time. When your tween decides to move on toward something new, work with her to pick a good match.

During these years, kids also start seriously growing into collectible miniatures games and constructible strategy games. *HeroClix*, *Pirates of the Spanish Main*, and *Race Day* appeal to tweens' need for strategy while simultaneously feeding the "little kid" side of their personality by letting them play with "toys" in a socially acceptable way. There's something enchanting about collecting little models that turn into a real, honest-to-goodness game.

Truly off-the-wall entries, like the chip-tossing game *Clout Fantasy*, also appeal to tween tastes. By combining elements of both luck and skill into a single concept — tossing your pieces into play — *Clout Fantasy* levels the playing field among kids of all developmental levels. The children with the best strategy skills might not land their carefully selected chips exactly where they hoped. Conversely, a keen eye and steady hand make up for some questionable strategic choices. One thing's for sure: *Clout Fantasy*'s concept looks innovative enough to keep the game going for a while.



Should you worry if your kids dive into "adult" games?

In a word, no. If your child understands the cards and the way that the game works and you do not feel that the game's content is inappropriate, then why not let him play?

Don't worry if your child skips directly into adult-level strategy games. The same goes for kids that go in the opposite direction by hanging onto the games they played when they were "young." Kids mature at wildly different rates — that's the way of such things. The important thing is to keep them engaged and playing.

As a parent — and this goes double for all of us dads out there — collectible games give you a natural way to maintain connection and

communication with your child during these years. Indulging in a game together gives you the time to enjoy each other's company. It also provides a low-stress opportunity to simply be available to your child. Many times, just "being there" counts for a lot when the confusion and change of the tween time sneak up and ambush your kid. More than once, my children used their "after game" time to share their thoughts and concerns about life.

Rather than worry too much about a particular game, revel in the fact that your children play games — and that you get to play with them. That's a topic worthy of your time!

Mixing Complexity and Depth (And Just Plain Fun) for Teens and Adults

If you ask two game enthusiasts to name their favorite game, you'll probably get 10 answers back — and most of them start with “it depends.” With so many games to choose from and so many people to play with, older players usually develop a number of “favorite” games. Even so, they tend to follow one game deeply, while playing several others for fun.

At the adult level, games take on an entirely new amount of complexity. The rule books get thicker, and the accompanying rule clarification documents eventually dwarf them! The games feature more cards, more combinations, and more core strategies, along with a dash of edgier themes or artwork thrown in for good measure. Flexibility of play and depth of strategy are king among these titles.

Along with the depth and flexibility come significantly greater time and money demands. To stay competitive in these high-end games requires a more-than-complete set of new cards from every new release, plus the time to read the cards, digest their capabilities, build new decks, and play-test them until you're drooling all over the deck protectors. Sure, you can play at a “casual” level, but these games really shine when you kick your skills into high gear. The top players can earn their way into reward-rich national and international tournaments or even start playing their favorite games professionally — with the chance to make real money at the same time!

At the top of this class, you find the granddaddy of all trading card games, *Magic: The Gathering* (see Chapter 4). *Magic* boasts one of the largest number of card releases, the most active player base, and one of the richest professional tournament series in gaming. Through an ongoing lineup of local tournaments, *Magic* also cultivates new players by giving them some protection against the top competitors while they build experience (and their associated card collections). If you want to get serious about a game, you can't go wrong with *Magic*.

If superheroes capture your interest more than the fantasy creatures inhabiting *Magic*, take the popular *Marvel* and *DC Vs. System* games for a spin (see Chapter 5). The *Vs. System* gives you as much strategy and fast-paced play as *Magic* but lets comic-book enthusiasts play with the characters they know and love. Like *Magic*, the *Vs. System* offers a rewarding professional tour system, plus lots of local and regional events, leading up to the nationals each summer.

Anime series that appeal to an older demographic often get their own games, just like the kid's series do. The *Fullmetal Alchemist* show, for instance, plays during Cartoon Network's "Adult Swim" segment of the evening. It appeals primarily to older teens and adults. The show's game picks up many of its on-screen themes and visuals and translates them into cards. Because the game aims at an older audience, the game's creators can indulge in an occasional "revealing moment," such as displaying some of the sexy **Psiren's**, um, *attributes* in a hard-to-find alternate artwork chase card (shown in Figure 14-2).



Figure 14-2: Because some series target older viewers, game designers can reveal more in their card artwork.

Companies that make and market miniatures games also want to draw the attention (and the money) of older players, but they do it mostly by appealing to the players' interests, such as science fiction. Whether the game relies on a serious combat and strategy approach (like the *MechWarrior* miniatures game) or a cheeky wink-wink-nod-nod funkiness (as with the constructible strategy game *Rocketmen*), older players still thrive on the strategy that drives these games.

Scaring Your Kids to Death (Or Not)

Some games look fascinating. Others look intriguing. Still others look unusual enough to make you want to give them a try. And then there are games that look like an inviting field of rusty razor blades just begging you to come out for a nice barefoot walk.

Very few games descend into that last category, but some appear from time to time. Luckily, they never last long in the marketplace, and they rarely draw more than cursory attention. In fact, I almost hesitate mentioning any in here for fear that I'll accidentally drum up your interest for them despite trying to warn you away.

Games landing in this area typically fall into the horror genre, although it's not a universal truth. Fantasy Flight's *Call of Cthulhu* (Figure 14-3; see Chapter 13 for more info about it) unquestionably thrives on horror, but it's a solid game with a good literary underpinning. Granted, some of the card art might keep you up nights or inspire you to sleep with the lights on (both in your bedroom *and* in the closet . . . and in the hall . . . and pretty much everywhere else, too), but the game experience still includes solid play value. At its heart, it's a solid game.

Figure 14-3: Despite its eerie appearance, *Call of Cthulhu* doesn't use art for shock value, but to build the game's creepy mood.



Play value really separates the releases that count on mere shock and schlock from the games that use horror as an integral part of the story. After all, does the world really *need* any more occult-overtone death-and-destruction games aimed at sullen teenagers? (Personally, *I* don't think so, but nobody asks me for insight on these things.)



Seriously, if you're buying for your children, please invest some time to learn about the game. You don't need to know all of the gory details and combo strategies, but you *do* need know enough to make an informed decision. Understanding the basics about a game also cuts down the possibility of knee-jerk reactions to an odd card or game term that happens to float out of the game and into your world, particularly if the game comes from the horror genre. Having some game knowledge also communicates to your kids that you care, that you're interested, and that they aren't getting away with something behind your back.

Part IV

Diving Deeper into the Hobby

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"I'll trade you my Warforged Brush Salesman and Aluminum Siding Giant for your Half-Orc Vacuum Cleaner Salesman and Frenzied Insurance Representative."

In this part . . .

As a kid, I rode my bike everywhere. Some summers, I felt like I lived on that bicycle. But despite my enduring appreciation for my two-wheeled transport, I never felt the urge to take it for a spin on a velodrome track, to careen up and down the hills of a BMX course, or to enter myself in a long-distance race. (Inspired by a movie, I briefly toyed with the idea of becoming a bike messenger . . . but I digress.)

With any hobby, there's a difference between dabbling and really diving in deep. I dabbled with my bike; one of my friends became a semi-professional racer. In the end, we both enjoyed what we did with our bikes, even though we took radically different paths with them.

Collectible gaming works the same way. You can dabble in this game or that and have a great time. You can also go headlong into a game with the goal of winning a national championship — or even hitting a pro tour! Choose whichever route you want to take and then take it. Collectible games truly let you set your own course!

That's why I put this part into the book. It explains the kinds of things you can do in collectible gaming if you want to get more involved. Whether you decide to join the tournament scene, assemble a massive collection of gaming goodies, create a part-time (or even full-time) card-selling business, or begin organizing and running tournaments, there's a corner of the hobby that fits you perfectly. Go forth and find it!

Chapter 15

Rising Above the Tabletop in Paint and Plastic

In This Chapter

- ▶ A look at how this crazy thing started
- ▶ Figuring out what makes a collectible miniatures game so much fun
- ▶ Playing your game on a board
- ▶ Commanding the troops over any battlefield, anywhere
- ▶ Sailing through dark oceans of adventure with build-it-yourself pieces

There's something exotic and enticing about miniatures games. Moving them around the terrain, seeing them poised to strike — the whole effect leaves you feeling like a general issuing orders to a miniature army. (Okay, maybe it's a somewhat geeky power thing, but I digress.)

After collectible miniatures games exploded onto the scene in 1999, they grew steadily until they established themselves as a true stand-alone segment of games. With their unique playing style and cool-looking 3-D pieces, these games mix the best components of traditional miniatures games with the addictive qualities that drive collectible card games. The result keeps even the most die-hard game player happy (and collecting, too).

This chapter helps you dive into the world of collectible miniatures games. It opens with a quick history of the game segment, touching on where it came from and whom your significant other can blame for your endless boxes of figures. From there, I look at a number of popular games in this genre, giving you a quick overview of each system.

A Miniature History

Once upon a time, back when the world was so new and all, a man named Jordan Weisman sat down to play a miniatures game with one of his young sons. Jordan knew a lot about miniatures games because his company, FASA Corporation, published several of them.

On this particular day, frustration — rather than fun — reigned at the table. Although Jordan and Son really *did* want to play, the game's imposing rules and hours of preparation time (spent assembling and painting the game pieces themselves) put off the younger Weisman. Although he found the miniatures game concept interesting, he wished for a simpler game that he and his dad could just sit down and play. Couldn't somebody else put the figures together and paint everything?

His son's frustration got Jordan thinking. What would it take to make a game like his son described? It would play fast and simply, straight out of the box. The pieces would come pre-assembled and painted. Instead of page after page of tracking sheets, each piece would somehow carry its own statistics. Borrowing a page from the world of trading card games, the pieces would come in randomly packed starters and boosters. The starter set would include the basic rules, plus a chart of the pieces' special abilities. Like a traditional miniatures game, this new concept would work on any flat surface, with measurements made in inches.

From that primordial idea stew, Jordan developed *Mage Knight*, the first collectible miniatures game. The gaming community wholeheartedly embraced *Mage Knight* (and purchased it in large quantities). With that victory under his belt, he expanded the concept to all kinds of new genres, including superheroes, giant combat robots, and even major league baseball.

Of course, that kind of success automatically whets the competitive appetites in other companies. Within a few years, several firms developed and released their own twists on the collectible miniatures game concept. Today, pre-painted collectible miniatures games solidly form their own unique niche within the collectible game world.

Elements of a Collectible Miniatures Game

All collectible miniatures games follow the same basic pattern, although (thanks to the world of patent law) each manufacturer puts its own unique spin on the details. Sure, each game's storyline and setting vary wildly, but if you scrape the surface just a bit, it's easy to see the industry's shared heritage.

At their heart, then, all collectible miniatures games share these basic design elements:

- ✔ **Ready to play, straight from the box:** More than anything else, this marks the biggest break between traditional miniatures games and collectible ones. Traditional games focus on deep, complex rule sets and revel in the hobby aspects of preparing the game pieces for battle. Collectible games move the player straight into what many folks feel is the fun part — playing the game — as quickly as possible. To do this, they sacrifice much of the depth and flexibility of the traditional games, substituting ease of play and consistency instead.
- ✔ **Prepainted pieces:** To gain that “ready-to-play” aspect, collectible game pieces arrive prepainted. Sure, the paint jobs don’t look mind-bogglingly beautiful, but hey — they’re painted, and you didn’t have to do it. If you really want beautifully rendered shading (or if your favorite figure’s cross-eyed stare drives you nuts), you can always retouch the pieces yourself.
- ✔ **Self-contained statistics:** Traditional miniatures games track game statistics with an endless array of tables, charts, and sundry pieces of paper. Collectible games accomplish the same thing with innovations like WizKids’ combat dial or the stat cards in the Wizards of the Coast games. By attaching the play statistics to each individual gamepiece, collectible games keep the players focused on the action rather than the rulebooks.
- ✔ **Played on either a board or a tabletop:** Most classic miniatures games play on a plain tabletop, using rulers to measure distance, to figure ranges, to determine the areas of different combat effects, and generally to drive the entire game. While some collectible games (notably *Mage Knight*, *MechWarrior*, and the popular *Pirates* games, all from WizKids) follow this tradition of free-form tabletop play, other games simplified the measuring system by moving the play area to a board. Some games, such as Wizards of the Coast’s *Dungeons & Dragons Miniatures Game*, use a square grid map, while others go for a bit more flexibility by using a hexagonal grid, like the *Lord of the Rings Tradeable Miniatures Game*, by Sabertooth Games.
- ✔ **Collectability makes some pieces hard to find:** The whole collectability aspect remains the biggest difference between traditional and collectible miniatures games. In a classic miniatures game, everybody automatically gets access to the same pool of pieces. If you want 12 of a particular piece, you just purchase and paint them. To accomplish the same thing with a collectible game, you either buy a lot of boosters and hope for the best, trade with your friends, or turn to secondary markets like eBay or the singles rack at your friendly local game store or convention exhibit hall. Although this sometimes leads to a syndrome in which “he who spends the most on his army wins the most games,” players inevitably find new ways to prove themselves by combining cheap, readily-available pieces in new and unexpected ways.

Although collectible miniatures games broke new ground in the industry, as times goes on, these games look back over their collective shoulder at the traditional miniatures world to find new interpretations of classic ideas. For instance, most of the top collectible games offer some non-collectible pieces available for individual purchase.

These special pieces are usually huge (sometimes 10 to 15 times the size of a regular gamepiece), making them impossible to put into a booster box. They also typically focus on one particular aspect of the game's story line. The *Star Wars Miniatures Game*, for instance, offers a massive AT-AT walker as a separate piece for people who want to re-create the battle on the ice planet of Hoth — or who simply want to cruise around the battlefield in a towering vehicle of mechanized destruction.

Putting Your Team on a Board

For someone coming to miniatures games from the much larger world of board games, playing a miniatures game with a board of some kind eases the transition. The board also simplifies measuring distances during gameplay because you really can't argue over how close two figures are when you simply need to count the spaces that separate them.

The following sections explore the most popular of the board-based collectible miniatures games. Although each game uses some unique playing styles, features, and storylines, they all share the underlying mechanic of either a square grid or hexagonal marked playing surface.



Can you play these games *without* the board for a more challenging and realistic scenario? Sure! If you want a different challenge, put away the board and get out your ruler. That's the beauty of collectible games: Ultimately, you get to play them in any way that you want!

Dungeons & Dragons Miniatures

www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=dnd/minis
Wizards of the Coast

Dungeons & Dragons captivates players today the way it did when it first appeared over 30 years ago. Bands of heroes, thieves, clerics, and more fight monsters, save captured characters, heal from wounds (hopefully), and collect their gold for a well-run adventure. Then the band gathers again the next

weekend to continue the skirmish or to embark upon a new adventure. Adventure after adventure, those little statistics on paper come to life as the thief gains skill at his craft, the hero adds to her strength, and that little magic-user they picked up in November turns out to be a fair spell-wielder after all.

Game players who always wanted to roleplay get their wish with *D&D Miniatures*. It takes the swash-buckling, gold-grabbing fantasy world of *Dungeons & Dragons* and places it squarely into the palm of the player's hand . . . in plastic.

Unlike most of the noncollectible miniatures games on the market, which sometimes require over 100 figures to create a passable army, *D&D Miniatures* creates its army, called a *warband*, in the same way players gather together to play the role-playing game. The numbers aren't large — a two-player starter set comes with twelve pieces, and players spend 100 points or less to assemble a *warband*. Each miniature also comes with a statistics card. One side of the card looks like a trading card and lists that character's type (Magical Beast, Dwarf), cost to play, ability level, speed, armor class, hit points, and special abilities. The other side of the stat card gives you all the information you need to develop a character sheet (a list of the vital details about any character, for instance strengths) for that miniature and use it in a regular *Dungeons & Dragons* game. Clever, eh?

In addition to stat cards and the miniatures themselves, a *D&D Miniatures* starter also comes with a 20-sided die, counters, a rulebook, and a battle grid, which is a play mat with nothing but 1-inch squares blocked out on a gray background. The set includes several 5-x-8-inch tile pieces for each player to put on top of the battle grid as terrain. Handily, the 1-inch squares on both the battle grid and the movable tile pieces are the perfect size for roleplaying as well, so miniatures players who also play the *D&D* roleplaying game can use the grid and tiles in their other games, as well as with the miniatures.

While the miniature figures in *Dungeons & Dragons* have types, such as Dwarf, Elf, and Dragon, they also have *alignment* — that quality that determines how dependably good, or how dependably evil, the character might be. *Alignment* is actually the roleplaying term; in keeping with the trading card game customs, every *D&D* miniature belongs to one of four factions: Lawful Good, Lawful Evil, Chaotic Good, or Chaotic Evil. Players choose a faction and then build an army around that faction.

D&D Miniatures appeared in 2003; since then, expansion sets (along with their important additions to the game) include the following:

- ✓ **Aberrations:** Unnatural monsters
- ✓ **Angelfire:** Angels and demons
- ✓ **Archfiends:** Evil characters

- ✓ **Deathknell:** Dead and the undead
- ✓ **Dragoneye:** Dragons
- ✓ **Giants of Legend Huge Pack:** Large figures
- ✓ **Harbinger:** Basic figures
- ✓ **Underdark:** Dungeon dwellers and monsters

In addition, players can purchase the *D&D Miniatures Handbook*, a hard-bound book that contains the rules in depth.

While the *D&D Miniatures* Web site might look like your ordinary Internet site, it contains a huge amount of information and is worth some serious exploration. You can find an online demo, expansion set lists, and tournament information — including a tournament locator. Use the online Warband Generator to help assemble a Warband for your next skirmish. While you're there, take a look at the printable maps and terrain tiles — there are even some foldable paper models to use during the game. (You can find the models in the list of 2004 *D&D Miniatures* articles archives.)

Star Wars Miniatures

www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=swminis
Wizards of the Coast

Once again, the two factions face off: the well-armored Imperial Stormtroopers battle the ragged but determined Rebel Alliance. While it looks as though the troopers will win this round, the Rebels have Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi on their side, an expert in using the Force. As we all know from watching the *Star Wars* movies again and again, the Force changes everything.

These miniatures take the *Star Wars* universe off the screen and out of the fans' heads and place it on the tabletop in solid plastic. Players can recreate their favorite scenarios using the characters they love, or combine figures in a way never portrayed on the Hollywood set. They're also molded in a size that makes them perfect character representations for the *Star Wars Roleplaying Game*. The figures provide a physical entity in front of the roleplayer to match the pencil-and-paper character.

Star Wars is designed for two, three, or four players who gather around a tabletop battle grid with a handful of figures that create their army, called a *squad*. A squad can cost up to 100 points to build, and it must consist of figures from one of the two factions, The Galactic Empire or The Rebel Alliance. (*Star Wars* also contains figures that fall into an independent Fringe faction. Its members can fight for either side.) A starter box comes with 10 figures; each figure has a statistics (stat) card that lists its cost, faction, individual fighting statistics, and special abilities. Some figures, such as the Elite Snowtrooper, have no special abilities. They're simply straight fighters.

In addition to the figures and cards, a starter box also contains terrain tiles, dice, tabletop battle grid, and a rulebook. *Star Wars* offers a very well-designed rulebook, with plenty of illustrations to show exactly how the figures move and attack on the battle grid. The battle grid goes on the tabletop to function as a playing mat; one side of the grid is plain with 1-inch squares, while the other side features a printed map. Players use the map side for a scenario with preset terrain, or they can use the terrain tiles on the map's blank side to design their own play spaces.

Star Wars expansion sets contain both starters and boosters for each set. Boosters, which help round out the player's set and provide options for increased strategy, include seven figures with stat cards. The first four *Star Wars* releases were *Rebel Storm* in 2004, *Clone Strike*, *Revenge of the Sith*, and *Universe*. Each set contained 60 figures; quite tiny for a trading card game, but a respectable number for a closed universe like *Star Wars*. *Rebel Storm*, the introductory set, saw a quick sellout and is now currently out of production.

A visit to the Web site reveals an online demo and figure lists for each release set. Also take a peek in the article archives to find lots of scenarios to print off and run, as well as an article called Holiday Tiles. Holiday Tiles gives you two new Tatooine terrain tiles for use in scenarios. May the Force be with you.

Navia Dratp

www.naviadratp.com

Bandai

Long ago, in the time after the last Ice Age, a group of sorcerers banded together into the Seven Elder Councilmen to search for the last of the Navia, mystically-empowered humans who have the power to summon a chaotic god into the world and thus plunge the world into unending suffering. The Elder Councilmen strive to locate the strongest of the Navia, for only she can summon the god and assist the Councilmen's goal of complete control. As the story unfolds, the Elder Councilmen (being sorcerers, after all) engineer events so that one after another, the Navia surface. Along with them come their Maseitai, guardian dragon-like creatures who guard each Navia and do her (spoken or unspoken) bidding.

Navia Dratp (pronounced "drap") combines a variant of *Shogi*, Japanese chess, with gorgeous anime-influenced figures and an unfolding storyline. Two players assemble their forces, consisting of one Navia and seven Maseitai. The players control the Navia, and the Navia control the Maseitai. In addition, the game uses nine flat pieces called Gullees (seven black, two red) which act somewhat like chess pawns. Each player's Gyullas, jewel-like pieces in white, blue, and orange, act as currency in the game.

All the *Navia Dratp* figures have the ability to *dratp* — change actions suddenly and drastically, often resulting in the acquisition of a special power — during the game. Each figure's base holds a turnable disk. The game begins with all figures un-dratped; each figure's disk shows its moving ability. The only figure on the 7-x-7 square board at the beginning of the game is each player's Navia, surrounded by the Gulled pieces. During a turn, a player can activate a Maseitai from where the Maseitei stand in a line behind the Navia, waiting to be summoned. Moving a flat Gulled piece gains currency for a player; one Gyulla jewel each time a black piece is moved forward, or three Gyullas for a red one. Capturing a Gulled piece awards the capturer one Gyulla.

Through moving and capturing Gulled pieces, a player builds his cash stash — which is a good thing, because it costs to Dratp a Maseitai. To Dratp a Maseitai, the player pays the Gyulla amount written on the figure's disk and then flips the disk to show the Dratp side. All of a sudden, that figure's movement changes — sometimes radically — and it frequently adds a special ability. One figure, for instance, gains the ability to ricochet off the edge of the board in movement, sending it down the board at an angle.

Each Maseitai comes with an Attribute card, which helps players track each figure's movement, Dratp movement, and special abilities. It also keeps players from grabbing a piece from the board during play and turning it upside down to read the attributes from the bottom, an error that occurred quite often during my first game. While Navia figures have Attribute cards as well, they have no real use because all Navia move the same way, and once a Navia Dratps, the game is over. Players win *Navia Dratp* in one of three ways: gain Gyullas and use them to Dratp the Navia; move the Navia all the way across the board over the border and into the opponent's Maseitei keep, the closest line to the opposite player, (called a Line Over or Navia Goal); checkmate an opponent's Navia.

Thus far, *Navia Dratp* consists of the original release, called *Unleashed Darkness*, and one expansion, *Resurgence*. *Resurgence* packages include one fully-painted figure in each booster box of three figures. Each player needs a starter set for *Navia Dratp*, which contains the modified chess-style board, one painted Navia, seven Maseitai, nine Gulled, eight Attribute cards, seventeen Gyulla crystals, and the rulebook. Truly exquisitely designed figures, the Maseitai come uncolored and cast in a dark pewter-like plastic. Two painted Navia appear as *chase* figures — the most valuable pieces in the package to a collector — in the booster sets, and boosters also include new Maseitai figures and pieces cast in colored, metallic-style plastic. Colored figures give players the option to double Maseitai on a team; normally all the Maseitai figures in the game must be unique.

Part of the *Navia Dratp* strategy centers around Maseitai selection for a player's Force. Unlike other collectable games, a Navia Force has no point cap. Players can make their force as strong as they like. However, regardless of the Force makeup, Navia still require 60 Gyullas to Dratp. Each time an opponent captures a player's Maseitai, the opponent gains that Maseitai's Dratp cost in Gyullas. Capturing a few high-cost Maseitai could mean a quick end to the game.

The *Navia Dratp* Web site contains an explanation of the game rules and a tournament list under Organized Play. The Calendar on the main site lists no tournaments, but loads of tournaments appear in the Bandai Organized Games Tournament lists. In addition, look on the Web site for the unfolding *Navia Dratp* story and a full list of pieces in the game, along with the story text that goes with each figure, a view of the piece, and its movement and special abilities.

Lord of the Rings

www.sabertoothgames.com/lotrtmg
Sabertooth

Standing together, their forces gathered, the companies prepare for battle. Today's landscape differs a bit from the day before; yesterday the combatants fought over a river, while today's skirmish takes them to the daunting walls of a forbidding castle. Anticipating fierce fighting, the group waits with barely concealed exhilaration at the thought of the fracas ahead. In the dim morning hours, they watch the enemy assemble his forces across the plain. Soon, all too soon, today's victor will arise, as the vanquished slink away amid wounds and worse.

Lord of the Rings captures the flair and the feeling of the massive movie battles from the movie trilogy. Create either a good or evil army and assemble the troops on one of the available terrain maps. Each map features hexagonal spaces to show where individual figures move as they cross the board, and the hex map spaces correlate with the Combat Hex that forms each figure's base. For really big movie-style battles, the individual maps fit together to form one big playing field.

This is a game of leaders commanding their troops, much like a traditional historical or fantasy miniatures game that uses many pieces to build a battle scenario. Each army must have leaders and followers. Heroes lead their minions into battle; the action-point slide on one side of the leader's base determines the number of followers that hero commands. Leaders are easy to spot, just like in real life. A *Lord of the Rings* Leader stands on a dark green base (referred to as a *Combat Hex*), while a normal warrior has a light green Combat Hex.

Expanding your horizons into noncollectible minis

In the beginning, miniatures games didn't come in booster packs. You didn't *hope* to pull the right figure from a sealed box; you simply *bought* the figure you wanted straight off the shelf. Granted, the figure came unassembled and unpainted, but that was part of the fun. You expected to spend time making the new figure truly *yours* by building, customizing, and painting it to match the rest of your army.

Non-collectible miniatures games still command a huge portion of the game market. Whether you want to play in traditional sword-and-sorcery fantasy realms, explore the future, or try your hand at a steampunk or magic-meets-high-tech genre, you can find a miniatures game to meet your dreams.

As I mention elsewhere, you don't simply crack open a box and start playing a traditional miniatures game. First, you assemble the figures, and (depending on the game system) customize them to your liking by changing out their weapons and other appendages. From there, you paint your troops according to whatever color scheme you pick. Finally, after all of that,

you're ready to grab that (usually) very large rulebook that came with the starter set and learn the game.

For a quick introduction to the traditional miniatures games, take a look at futuristic games like *Battletech* (Iron Wind Metals), *CAV* (Reaper), *Heavy Gear* (Dream Pod 9), *Resolution DT* (Aberrant Games), *Starship Troopers* (Mongoose Publishing), and *Warhammer 40,000* (Games Workshop). For a more fantasy-driven experience, try the steampunk-style *Warmachine* (Privateer Press) or classic fantasy settings like the *Lord of the Rings* or *Warhammer Fantasy* (both from Games Workshop). If history strikes your interest, take a look at the World War II game, *Flames of War* (Battlefront). Check them out at your friendly local game store!

If you really want to dive into model collecting and painting of historical miniatures, give *De Bellis Antiquitatis* from Wargames Research Group — otherwise known as *DBA* — a shot to stage real historical battles with amazingly accurate reproductions of period soldiers and horses.

To simulate the strength of heroes compared to their minions (and perhaps to further strengthen the similarity between *Lord of the Rings* and traditional miniatures games), the game uses a lot of dice. It uses handfuls of dice. Some leaders may get five dice per attack; plus, if an army is sneaky enough to attack a foe from behind, the player gets to roll extra dice for well-executed strategy. Personally, I think it's really because it sounds so impressive when a handful of dice hit the table for an attack roll. The sound often brings people from across the room. They want to see what game could be important enough to require all those dice.

Even though the game is usually played good side against evil, nothing prohibits two good armies from battling or evil fighting evil. Good against evil, however, maintains the original storyline, so this is the way most players prefer. Each player's goal is to reduce an opponent's army by half (or more)

of its figures. For example, if each player begins with a dozen figures, the first player to reduce his opponent's army to six or fewer figures wins the game. However, *Lord of the Rings* also offers a couple other avenues for triumph. If a player uses Frodo as the Ring-bearer and manages to get Frodo across the board, she wins the game. Alternatively, an evil army who kills Frodo automatically succeeds as well. Thus, playing Frodo can earn praise or peril.

Normally a *Lord of the Rings* army costs around 1,000 to 1,500 points per game, but a game can cost as much or as little as both players agree upon. Higher point totals enable players to use bigger or more powerful figures — which, in turn, allow more dice to hit the table — and some of the special figures can get pretty big. Large figures include favorites from the movies such as the Cave Troll, Treebeard, Balrog, and Sauron himself!

After it's selected and placed on the terrain map, a player's army moves as a unit. During a turn, one player's figures all do something — they move, attack, or hold their position. Then the other player responds with his entire army. After each figure either moves into position, begins an attack, or remains stationary, then the armies move into a combat phase in which groups standing within combat range resolve their conflicts. Figures move and attack, move and attack, until half a player's figures are gone or Frodo is either victorious or dead.

Figures have five levels shown on the base's sliders or wheels. White shows that the figure came in the starter set, while orange indicates a level 1 figure, red marks level 2, purple marks level 3, and dark blue marks a level 4 figure. (Grouped with other figures, the dark blue sliders look almost black.) In addition, each figure base also displays a symbol that marks the figure as common, uncommon, rare, ultra-rare, or promotional.

After the first set appeared, Sabertooth redesigned the figure bases and replaced the sliders with small inset wheels to show a figure's levels. You might think that the sliders would jiggle out of position during play and cause an argument in the middle of a game; actually, they're pretty tightly wedged into the bases and tend to stay where they're positioned. The redesign was due to figure limits — with the sliders, only six or seven positions fit comfortably on the base track; the wheels show nine numerals with ease. The wheels gave the designers more flexibility. They do make it more difficult to tell the figure's rarity from afar, though, because the wheels hide inside the base more than the sliding handles do.

Since its original release in 2003, *Lord of the Rings* saw several expansions, including the original *Lord of the Rings* Starter and Booster sets, *Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Paths of the Dead*. Each set incorporates new figures, advanced levels, and increased strategy options. Checklists for all the expansion sets lie tucked away on the *Lord of the Rings* Web site.

Also see the Web site for tournament rules and organized play information, including a list of all the upcoming tournaments along with each event's scheduled prizes. This is a nice touch — players know exactly what they're competing for before they sign up for a tournament. The Web site also contains an army list form (to keep track of your forces during a game) and hex grids (so players can build their own maps if they're so inclined). The site's Battle Lore section contains articles on strategy and rules variations that might intrigue players familiar with the game.

Playing on Any Handy Flat Surface

It doesn't take much to launch a quick game of miniatures with your friends. In fact, all you need is your army, a ruler, some dice, and a relatively flat place to play. It doesn't even need to be *totally* flat — in fact, some of the best battles take place on uneven terrain, filled with mock hills and dotted with pretend swamps.

All of the following games give you the freedom to play without a board. You get to design the landscape for each game based on your team's strategy. Gather your forces, grab your terrain, and head into battle — but don't forget your ruler!

Mage Knight

www.wizkidsgames.com/MageKnight
WizKids

Mage Knight brings the world of pre-painted elves, fairies, and magic users into the realm of plastic (See Figure 15-1). Each figure sits on a plastic disc base that has the figure's statistics built right into it, so there's no book to consult endlessly and no gamemaster to appeal to. (Well, the game does have tournament directors during tournament play, but they function more as the judges of the realm than as masters of all they survey.)

Mage Knight revolves around a land of endless conflict and conquest. A dozen factions populate the *Mage Knight* lands, each with its own strength and its own opinion of the other eleven. (Depending on the list you use and the way you count them, *Mage Knight* may offer as few as 9 factions or as many as 16. Count 'em your way and see what you come up with.) Dragons, orcs, and wraiths duke it out on a battlefield strewn with obstacles, called *blocking terrain*, as they fight to retain or grasp control of an object, called the *objective*.

At the end of 50 minutes of playing time, the player in control of the objective wins. Wiping out an opponent's army also wins the game.

While a perfectly usable objective disc comes with each starter set, players often substitute their own objectives to better suit their scenario. Armies may find themselves fighting over a plastic jewel, a small treasure box, or a chocolate coin — or is it only in my games that we battle over chocolate? (Each December, the Ghirardelli Chocolate Company produces chocolate coins worth fighting over, but I digress.)

Each *Mage Knight* figure's base has a combat dial built into it. Together, the base and the dial function as the informational unit for the figure. Most players call the two parts *the base* collectively. The figure's base shows its combat arc, which is the space the miniature uses to fire at other figures. Most *Mage Knight* figures don't have the ability to fire from their backsides, much like real life. Thus, a *Mage Knight* combat arc might allow a figure to shoot only within the 45 degrees that lie right in front of its face. The base also reveals the figure's faction, speed, and range, as well as other levels and abilities. Players turn the combat dial for each point of damage a figure incurs when attacked; when the dial shows three skulls, the figure is out of the game.



Figure 15-1:
Seeker
Elydia is a
skillful
healer with
a good
attack
value,
making her
a valuable
addition to
your game.

Players assemble their armies from the host of figures available. Usually, players concentrate their army-building efforts on a single faction or one overriding skill, but players can mix *Mage Knight* factions freely. Each game has its own point cost, usually between 200 and 400 points. More than 400 points per army could signify a really long game — one you might want to attend with pizza money in addition to an assembled army.

One neat facet of the *Mage Knight* miniatures (besides the combat dial, which was revolutionary in miniatures games when WizKids developed it) is a figure's ability to customize. Some figures come with larger bases measuring a full 1½ inches across. These bases contain little slots that can hold various *item paddles* — small plastic pieces that players punch from item data cards to equip their warriors. Items give exceptional fighting ability, such as the Wand of Fencing that gives a figure the ability to parry, or increased sensitivity through an item like the Bracers of the Ranger, which allows Elementals to feel the vibrations of the trees. (This item-carrying ability also exists within the world of *MechWarrior*, also a WizKids game. See the *MechWarrior* section in this chapter for more details.)

Mage Knight has been around in its new incarnation since 2003; an earlier, less-refined *Mage Knight* appeared in 1999 or so. First-edition figures, for the most part, are incompatible with *Mage Knight 2.0*, the *Mage Knight* of today. While WizKids released several expansion sets for the earlier game, they also developed several current expansion sets that are compatible with the second-edition rule set and feature the redesigned figure base. They include *Mage Knight 2.0* Starters and Boosters, the original 2.0 set; *Dark Riders*; *Sorcery*; *Omens*; and *Nexus*.

Mage Knight is currently out of production, but it might come back in any number of ways. For now, lots of figures remain available, tournaments continue, and the Web site thrives. Visit the Web site to download some nice 3-D terrain models to print and build for *Mage Knight* scenarios. The site also offers a nice set of articles on building terrain, divided into three crafting skill levels — useful no matter what miniatures game you might play. New or enthusiastic players with lots of playing time on their hands can look for the long list of past official tournament scenarios they can download and play.

MechWarrior

www.wizkidsgames.com/mechwarrior
WizKids

The year is 3135. Factions of the future battle for supremacy and control. BattleMechs, the jewels of the battlefield, stand three stories tall and bristle

with weaponry. Piloted by remarkably trained MechWarriors, humans with devotion, training, and skill, these battle machines dominate the battlefields they survey. Supported by infantry units and vehicles, the BattleMechs (or Mechs) strike terror and awe into the hearts of all who see them. Nearly invincible, they shine in places other units would be destroyed. The *MechWarrior* struggle pits Mech against Mech with the planet Terra as prize.

MechWarrior players command an army comprising one or more Mechs, Vehicles, and Units. Each figure has a point cost; *MechWarrior* armies usually total to about 450. While an army doesn't require a Mech, the large figures bring a lot of complexity to the game. Besides, they look really cool on the tabletop.

As you can see in Figure 15-2, each *MechWarrior* figure sits on a base. The base provides all the information for the figure — its defense and attack values, range of attack, and speed and damage levels. If the piece is a Mech, an additional dial shows the machine's heat level. Every time a Mech does something, it generates heat. Moving a Mech gives the heat dial one click, as does combat. Too many heat clicks and the heat begins to affect the Mech's weapons and movement. Once heated, a Mech can cool by venting, which reverses the clicks on the heat dial, but that requires letting the Mech rest instead of issuing a movement or combat command.

Players can customize their Mechs with specific pilots and special abilities. Plastic paddles that punch out of data cards fit into slots in the Mech base. This alters a Mech's equipment or gives the Mech specific advantages in movement or combat. Like almost everything that enhances a figure in a miniatures game, the paddles cost points to use.

Figure 15-2:
Battle for
control of
planet Terra
with Mechs
Violator and
MadCat.



Bases also indicate firing range. An arc printed on the base shows the allowable range that a figure can fire; outside that range, firing is impossible. While a few figures have a firing arc that extends a full 360 degrees, such as the DI Morgan Assault Tank with its revolving turret, most figures' arcs fall within 180 degrees or less.

In addition to firing ranges, the figures themselves feature three different types of weapons for combat: ballistic, energy, and melee (hand-to-hand combat). Each weapon type comes with its own range; if an enemy stands too close or too far away, the miniature cannot attack. *MechWarrior* ranges refer to one-inch increments, and a ruler comes with each *MechWarrior* starter set.

MechWarrior has seen several expansions since its first appearance in 2002. In fact, the original base starter set was replaced with new starters and updated rules in 2005 with the release of *Age of Destruction*. At least three booster sets appeared after *Age of Destruction*, all featuring the updated rules.

While *MechWarrior* contains some rather complicated playing rules, WizKids offers several options outside of regular tournament play that help keep the game fresh and alive. Play@home scenarios, downloadable from the Web site, consist of several non-tournament legal scenarios that *MechWarrior* players can enjoy just for fun. WizKids also offers special tournaments that are story-line events. These scenarios follow the *MechWarrior* tales and current story-line, allowing fans to enact the stories they love.

Also visit the Web site for fiction, Technical Read-Outs (set lists), and past official scenarios that players can print and use in free play. Printable action tokens wait for downloading on the site in case you lost yours, and the site contains official terrain printouts for tournaments (although anyone can use them). Terrain plays a very important role in *MechWarrior*, especially with the Mechs themselves. *MechWarrior* players commonly put water terrain down because water cools the mech. They act as a deterrent to tanks and infantry units (both yours and your enemy's), but they help to reverse the Mech's heat clicks.

Sailing Your Fleet through Water and Space

The final two games in this chapter form their own little sub-section of collectible miniatures games. Given their innovative nature, it shouldn't surprise anyone that both games come from WizKids, the company that started collectible miniatures gaming.

Both *Pirates* and *Rocketmen* are *constructible* miniatures games. Although they come in booster packs, just like the other games in this realm, these games arrive preprinted on plastic cards that resemble demented credit card

blanks. Each card includes a preprinted, die-cut section of your ship (be it space or sea-going). You need to take a few moments to carefully punch out the pieces and assemble the ship before playing.

This technique lets you carry a large number of playing pieces in a relatively small binder, which is a welcomed change from the ever-growing “tub of figures” you get by playing most collectible miniatures games.



If you never tried either of these games, start with a few packs of *Pirates*. It introduces the “build-it-yourself” game piece concept very well, and makes a nice transition to *Rocketmen*. Enjoy!

Pirates

www.wizkidsgames.com/pirates
WizKids

Ahoy there, matey! Grab yer gear and climb aboard. We’re off to search for gold on many an isle. Mind yer guns, though — we’re not the only pirates on the sea. This beauty here, she’s got guns to spare. Pandora’s her name, and she holds a treasure box of surprises for ships daring enough to try to gun ’er down.

Build your ships, set your isles, plunk down your gold, and you’re ready to sail the seas with *Pirates*, the constructible strategy game (CSG). The beauty of this miniatures game is that you build your own models from plastic parts that come pressed into credit-card sized sheets. After a player constructs the ship, the card blank becomes that ship’s data card as well as its movement and firing measure. Pandora, for example, is a gorgeous, tightly-built, three-masted ship that can carry seven points’ worth of gold or crew, and she moves up to the length of the card blank (a Long range movement) with every turn. Small ships require one or two cards’ worth of plastic to build them, while large ship parts require three entire cards.

The goal of *Pirates* is to build a stunning fleet, sail the seas, and bring back gold to your home island while attacking your opponent’s ships (if you succeed and the ship sinks, you get any gold it might be carrying) and protecting your own. One game pack is all it takes to get into the game. The game pack contains two ships, gold or crew pieces, a die, rules, and an island. Players build their ranks based on a point system; 30 points’ worth of ships and crew is the usual standard. In the *Pirates of the Spanish Main* pack I opened last, I found two Pirate ships: the Pandora, worth 11 points, and the glorious Revenant, a five-masted ship that costs 15 points to sail. Those two ships take me to 26 points; I can stop there or look for some inexpensive crew that might give my ship a nifty special ability or two.

When the game is over, each model can be deconstructed and replaced back into its card blank for storage. These cards can then go into individual card

sleeves, be filed into a card box like regular trading cards, or can slide into individual slots in a binder sheet (my preferred method of storage because then I can see several ships at a time while glancing through the binder later.) Some players build their fleet and then keep it intact. They store unconstructed cards in some way, and then use a box of some kind to hold constructed ships. If they already know which ships they want to use, bringing them preconstructed saves a few moments before the game.



When the assembly instructions say to grasp the sails at the base to push them into the ship deck during construction, they really mean it. After assembling many ships, I finally snapped a sail on a new model because I held the sail at its middle rather than its base. Oops.

Pirates debuted in 2004, and each *Pirates* set is a stand-alone game. Players can also combine ships from various sets to build fleets. Like most collectible games, every expansion introduces new mechanics and factions. *Pirates of the Spanish Main* included ships from Spain, England, and those sneaky Pirates. *The Crimson Coast* set gave us French ships, forts, and terrain and weather complications printed on the back of island pieces. *Pirates of the Revolution* introduces American ships, such as the Freedom and the Bonhomme Richard, as well as offering new ships for the French, Spanish, and English fleets. In addition, fire now becomes a hazard on the historical wooden ships. (The *Pirates of the Revolution* cards, printed on bright blue card blanks, look patriotic before you even put the ships together. And who wouldn't want the glory of sailing on the *Bonhomme Richard* with John Paul Jones?) *Pirates of the Barbary Coast* moves the location of the gold hunt and includes Barbary Corsairs.

If you visit the Web site, you can see the well-done animations that give an overview of the game. The animations even show, in detail, how to build the ships reliably so that all the parts are intact when you're finished, every time. (The trick — as I've learned through personal experience — is to hold the masts at their bottoms and insert them into the slot at a slight angle.) Also check out the Web site for complete rules for each expansion set, tournament rules, and checklists for each set's ships, crew, and events. Building guides in the Resources section help navigate the way through the shipbuilding process, and *Tales of the Spanish Main* offers fiction for the battle-weary. Sail on, mates, and go for the gold!

Rocketmen

www.wizkidsgames.com/rocketmen
WizKids

After taking control of Earth, the Legion of Terra and the planet Mars join forces to form the Axis of Evil, with their sights on conquering or destroying

everyone else in the galaxy. Without the resistance of a group of Earth Rebels and the planets Mercury and Venus, who combine and call themselves the Alliance of Free Planets, the Axis of Evil might have succeeded. Hey, depending on the outcome of the games, they might succeed anyway. But that part's up to you.

A refreshing breeze in the gaming world after countless sword-and-sorcery fantasy card and miniatures games, *Rocketmen* brings campy 1930s style to the tabletop. (See Figure 15-3.) Aimed at adults and teens as well as kids, the game features ships, asteroids, space combat, and home bases — everything you'd want from a game that has its own set of cartoon shorts. Like the movie serials it resembles, each *Rocketmen* release is called a *season*. While the first season, *Axis of Evil*, lists Mercury, the Rebels, and Venus as allies against Terra and Mars, that may change in future seasons in the same way that viewers were never sure who will stay true in the serial world. Stay tuned, viewers, for next season, when we find out whether Mercury remains a Free Planet or turns to help the Axis of Evil.

Like *Pirates*, *Rocketmen* is a constructible strategy game (CSG) for two or more players. Players purchase packs that contain credit-card sized plastic cards and assemble the game by punching pieces out of the cards and putting them together. After they're put together, the ships, crew, and such can be stored in plastic baggies, plastic boxes, or whatever — or players can disassemble each ship, which only takes a few seconds apiece, and press them right back into the cards they came from. Then those cards can be stored flat in a card box or placed in card sleeves for a bit more protection. Clever, huh?

Rocketmen cards come in packs. Each pack contains everything one player needs to play the game: two ships with their base cards or one ship and one Fighter squadron with bases, crew, a resource card, two ship data cards, an asteroid, a tiny six-sided die (called a d6 in the tabletop gaming world), and rules. The *Axis of Evil* season contains 72 different ships, so there's plenty to choose from. Assembly instructions for each ship are helpfully printed on each card. Each ship contains pegs that hold shields and weapons; the choice to use all shields, all weapons, or a combination of the two is completely up to each player as she builds her ships.

Ship data cards provide all the information players need for each craft. The card lists the ship's faction, its special abilities, its cost, Atomic Engine Power points (AP), Weapons Rating (WR), and Cargo space. A ship's movement and weapon range are printed right on the data card, so the game requires no extra measuring device. Players also choose from four different ship types: Fighters, Rocketships, Cruisers, and Space Stations. Each type offers different strengths and size, and sometimes they differ in cost as well.



Figure 15-3:
Rocketmen
features
tiny
construct-
ible rocket
ships.

Players create active fleets that cost 30 points or less. If they like, they can also assemble an inactive fleet, also costing less than 30 points, and bring the inactive fleet into play when they can afford it. Fleets can contain only ships or ships and crew. Outfitting ships with crew members also gives them added advantages, though crew members cost points to add to a ship. Crew members aren't necessary for play, and some players like to travel light, but those who use available crew to their full potential sometimes find their games quick and lethal to an opponent's team. A player wins either by destroying all an opponent's active ships or by capturing the opponent's home base.

Look for the rules at the *Rocketmen* Web site. You can also watch the cartoon shorts that form the storyline or download them to your computer. For players entranced enough with the shorts that they want to own them on DVD, WizKids offers a DVD with all the *Rocketmen* episodes. It also includes special ship and crew cards unavailable anywhere else, as an added incentive. The videos are cute; they take you back to the days when a movie cost between a dime and fifty cents to watch, and you couldn't wait for the next installment of *Dick Tracy*.

Chapter 16

Collecting, Trading, Storing, and Transporting Your Goodies

In This Chapter

- ▶ Building your strategy by building your collection
 - ▶ Trading means never saying, “Sorry, I’m out of money”
 - ▶ Card storage 101
 - ▶ Moving your miniatures
-

I think it’s a plot — or maybe some kind of cardboard arms race. First, you start playing a trading card game (or collectible miniatures game — the process works exactly the same way). Next, you discover that you really enjoy the game, so you pick up a few boosters. The boosters give you one or two really cool and powerful cards, so you use them in your deck. Your “big guns” do some damage, but you see more potential. If only you had a few other cards to go with them — yeah, some cards to make combinations! So you head back into the booster pack display at your local store, buying packs and hoping you pick up what you need.

Yup, it’s definitely a plot. (But at least it’s a *fun* plot.)

As the names imply, *collecting* and *trading* sit at the heart of the games in this book. Playing the games themselves may give you lots of fun times, but building your card or figure collection adds a whole new dimension to that fun by opening up new strategies in the game, giving you the ability to experiment with unusual combinations, and generally increasing your “coolness” factor among the other players when you whip out a really rare or unusual card.

There’s an art to collecting and trading your game goods — particularly when it comes to arranging the best deals in your trades. This chapter gets into some of the details about trading, talks about completing your collections by purchasing “singles” (individual cards or figures), and gives you ideas and online contacts for both selling and trading pieces you’ve collected.

Playing with Possibilities by Collecting More Stuff

In a trading card game, the designers build cards for various roles. Some cards make great frontal attack pieces, while others work best after your opponent's defenses start breaking down. Still others take a purely supportive role, existing only to enhance other cards and help them do their respective jobs all the better.

To make all of this magic work and to start seeing the designer's overall concepts for the game, you need a bunch of cards. In fact, you often need *more* than a bunch — you need mass quantities of them. That's where the *collectible* in *collectible card games* comes into play.

By collecting plenty of cards or game pieces, you give yourself access to the best combinations and the strongest overall decks, plus you gain the opportunity to experiment with new combos to see if you can discover previously unknown pairings made from the cards in your collection. A strong collection also gives you solid trading stock to help you swap with other players for the special cards you desire (but more about that in the next section).

You can add more cards in a number of ways. The quickest and easiest way to build your collection involves nipping off to your Friendly Local Game Store and buying more booster packs. Each pack gives you a stack of randomized cards or figures in various rarities. You typically get a single “rare” item, two or three “uncommon” ones, and a handful of “commons” to round out the package.



Buying packs works best when you start playing a new game, when a new expansion comes out for your current game, or when one of your relatives wants to buy you a gift. It makes life a lot easier when you ask your uncle for “ten packs of *Fullmetal Alchemist* game cards” instead of “the level 2 Transmutation version of **Alphonse Elric, Seven Feet of Trouble**.”

After collecting cards for a while, the list of cards missing from your binders gets pretty small. At this point, purchasing packs stops making sense unless you want to build your trading stock or hunt down a super-rare card without paying the price people want for it on eBay. Instead of packs, look to the *single card areas* of your game store.

Almost every store offers a selection of individual cards for purchase. Unlike booster packs, purchasing a single lets you pick precisely what you want. The trade-off usually comes in the price; a rare or powerful card commands a

lot more money than a mundane common one. Instead of paying \$3.95 and getting a pack of cards, you might pay \$5, \$10, \$20, or even more for a single card that lots of people want. Even at these prices, if that's the card that your collection *really* needs, then buying it as a single might make the most sense. After all, you'd probably spend a lot more than the card's cost as a single if you bought booster pack after booster pack in a vain hope of randomly pulling one.



Some cards or miniatures don't come in boosters or starters at all. You can find these special promotional items *new* only at tournaments, conventions, or sometimes through special magazine offers. For more about these unique items, see the sidebar later in this chapter.

Swapping for the Things You Want or Need but Can't Afford

Sometimes, no matter how hard you try, you just can't find the card or figure that you want. You chased it through booster packs, pursued it at tournaments, queued for it in convention exhibit halls, and missed it by moments in the singles case of your favorite game store, but still it eludes your grasp. Now imagine that one of your friends owns the card you want so very much. How could you wrangle it from him to make your day — and your collection — complete? Try offering a trade!



Chapter 22 goes into more depth than you probably want about the mechanics of trading. It starts with tips on why keeping your cards organized saves you from making the kind of silly mistakes that I periodically do, and takes you all the way through judging card condition, deciding how much to offer, and closing the deal. It also provides a few savvy negotiating tips to help you get the best deal possible. If you've never really traded cards before, dive deeply into the information in that chapter before even *thinking* about a serious swap that involves your collection's nicer cards.

Face-to-face options

After you understand the details, try seeking out a trade of your own. Start by attending a tournament for your favorite game at your Friendly Local Game Store. No matter the number of players who attend, somebody's bound to need one card or another. If you own what they need and you're willing to part with it, give the world of trading a spin. (Just make sure you read Chapter 22 first, okay?)

The game store itself might trade some of your cards for items from their singles display, but you don't typically get the best trade that way. Most stores want the highest-quality cards and figures, and they typically give you half of the figure's retail value in credit. You can then spend the credit on another single card. The store *might* let you "spend" your credit on unopened booster packs, but that entirely depends on the store policies. (For the record, most stores don't do that, but it never hurts to ask.)

Local, regional, and national game conventions offer plenty of lively trading action, both with other players and with dealers in the exhibit hall — particularly if you win a special convention promo card at one of the tournaments.



When trading with players that you meet at the show, make sure you keep a sharp eye on your trading stock *and* your playing deck at all times. In the hustle, bustle, and excitement of a convention tournament, it's easy for someone to accidentally grab the wrong deck of cards or pick up a small binder mixed into a stack of other books. Nobody takes better care of your gear than you, so make sure that you *watch your stuff!*

If you trade with dealers on the show floor, make sure you check with several companies before making your decision. The laws of supply and demand work the same at a game convention as they do everywhere else, so don't take the first offer you receive (unless it's *so* good that you simply can't pass it up). It's not unusual for the value of a card to vary wildly between dealers. Their offers depend a lot on their current stock, how their sales go, and which day of the convention it is. When in doubt, exercise your right to say "no," just like Chapter 22 says. (You'll thank me later.)

Going the online route

If you can't get to a convention or you need something that nobody in the local tournament scene owns, you might try your hand at online trading through the discussion boards and Web sites that cover your game. This type of trade leaves you feeling a bit nervous sometimes, but if you do it right and take the proper care, online trades can work very, very well.

To find a good spot for online trading, start with the game manufacturer's Web site. Almost every game company site includes discussion forums. Go to the Web site, dive into the forums, and look for a trading folder. Some companies put the trading zone in its own area (like WizKids does in Figure 16-1), while others create separate trading discussions for each product in their lines. (See the Sabertooth Games forum in Figure 16-2.) It might take some looking, but eventually you'll find the forum area that you want.

Figure 16-1: By putting all of the trading areas together, WizKids makes them easy to find.

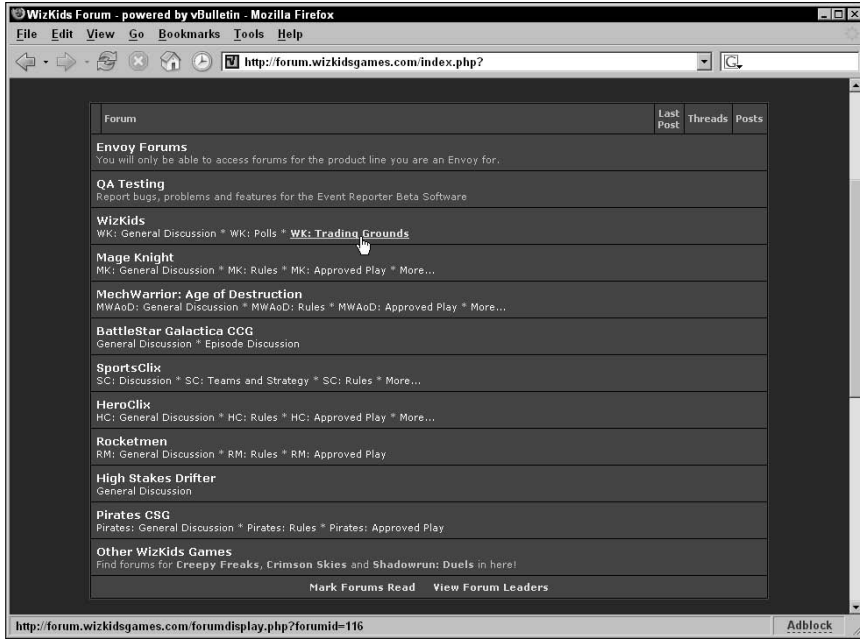
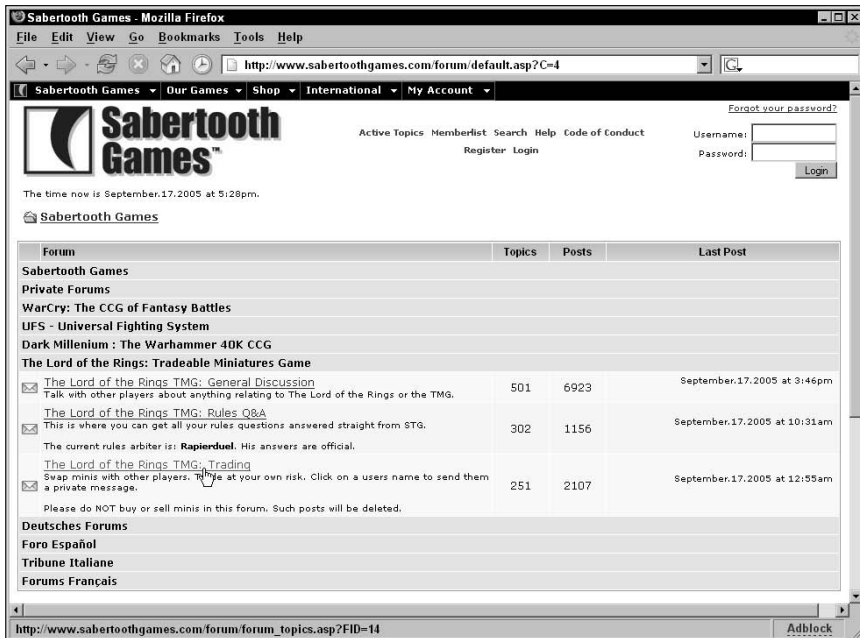


Figure 16-2: Sabertooth Games includes a trading forum in each product's discussion area.





To post in the Web site forums, you usually need to create an account for the Web site. Luckily, registration costs nothing and takes only a few moments. If your preteen child wants access to the site, you might need to fill out and mail (yes, *postal* mail) a special form to the game company telling them that it's okay to allow your child onto their system.

Third-party information sites covering your game frequently offer trading zones, too. As with the manufacturer sites, you usually need to register before getting full access to the discussion areas. For example, the well-known HeroClix information site HCREalms (www.hcrealms.com) offers a full-featured trading area for all of its members. Most of these third-party sites offer free memberships, just like the manufacturer sites.

After you get set up with the site and find your way to the trading forums, browse through the various *have/want* lists that players have posted there. As the name implies, these lists catalog what each person has to trade and wants to receive in trade. You can reply to the person directly through the discussion area or privately through e-mail or the board's built-in instant-messaging system.



Getting some special pieces for your collection

Unfortunately, not every card or figure you need for your collection comes from a booster. Game companies save some of the coolest items for special events, convention promotions, and tournament prizes. That doesn't mean you can't get these goodies, but it *does* mean that acquiring them could take some extra effort (or money) on your part.

If you regularly read magazines like *InQuest Gamer* and *Scrye*, you've probably run across some of their "exclusive" figure offers already. WizKids and other miniatures companies do a lot of magazine-based promotional offers. To get the special item from promotions like these, you just find the order form in the magazine, fill it out, pack it with a check or credit card number, and ship it out in the day's mail. Within 4 to 400 weeks

(more like 4 to 6 usually, but it *feels* like 400 sometimes), your cool figures arrive in the mail.

These promo items typically cost a few dollars, but never too much. You can almost always buy more than one figure with the same order form, so make a habit of picking up at least one (if not two or three) spares. They make *wonderful* trading stock, especially if you let your trading buddies know that you bought a few extras so they don't pick up one on eBay.

For some of the neatest prizes, play in tournaments at local stores and conventions. The best players always get a limited-edition card or figure, but the company usually provides a "sportsmanship" prize as well. Some events give "participation awards" so that everybody goes home with a cool trinket.

You might also find some *good trader lists* (and their corollary, the *bad trader lists*) lurking among the postings. To help new members make safer trades, experienced board members compile lists of people they traded with who gave them good service and a good product. Whenever possible, work with people listed in the good trader lists. After you start trading, maintain a *good trader* list of your own to reward the people you trade with. They'll do the same for you!



During your first few online trading experiences, don't be too surprised if the other person in the trade asks to receive your figure before shipping his figure to you. That's not uncommon when working with a new trader. Because the people in the forum don't know you yet, asking you to ship your figure first establishes that you deserve their trust. After getting several *good trader* recommendations from established forum members, you informally graduate into simultaneous shipping. (You and the other trader ship the figures at the same time.)

Storing Your Cards in Sleeves, Binders, and Boxes

Even though the game happened almost 10 years ago, I still remember the shocked look etched onto my opponent's face. We had just started playing a round of Decipher's now-dead *Star Wars Customizable Card Game* when I put my first few cards onto the table. My opponent's face twisted in disbelief as he said, "That's a black-bordered Darth Vader. You shuffled a black-bordered Darth Vader without using *deck protectors!*?"

Those last two words practically shot out of his mouth with lethal force. Up to that point, I never thought much about the condition of my cards. The concept that some of the cards had real monetary value just didn't sink into my head. Back then, they were cards in a game — and game cards get progressively trashed the more you play the game. To me, the occasional bend and shuffle scuff showed my dedication to the game, not my ignorance of card-protection technology.

These days, the act of putting your cards into protectors of one kind or another should happen almost automatically — like looking for a recycling bin after finishing a can of soda. You open a pack of cards, separate out the valuable ones, and sleeve them immediately. After the cards slide into their safe little habitat, you breathe a sigh of relief and take the time to read, analyze, and enjoy ownership of your new goodies.

Players feel so strongly about protecting their cards that the protection business grew into an industry all its own. Companies like BCW, Max Protection, Rook, and UltraPro make their revenues by helping players keep their cards and miniatures safe and sound.



When you purchase protectors for your cards, make sure you get the right size. Game cards come in two basic sizes: big poker-size cards and slim bridge-size cards (also known as “club” cards). Most trading card games use poker-size cards, but others (notably *Yu-Gi-Oh!*) go with the smaller trim size. If you aren’t sure which size you need, take some of your cards to your local game store and try them in some deck protectors. The folks at the store can help you find exactly what your game needs.

Deck protectors

Start defending your card investment with the most basic game accessory out there: a couple packs of deck protectors. The total cost depends on the number of cards in your deck, but for most games, a single \$10 bill easily covers the proper quantity of protectors matched with a case to hold everything. Heck, you might even get some change back!

Deck protectors act like simple plastic shields for your cards. As you shuffle, cut, deal, flip, and do whatever else to your deck, the protectors suck up the damage that your cards would otherwise sustain. The cards stay pristine and beautiful in their little plastic cocoons. It’s a thing of beauty!



Nothing lasts forever in this life, not even deck protectors. Most players need to replace their protectors every 6 to 12 months because the protectors simply wear out — their seams split; the protector’s clear front gets cloudy from the scuffing; you decide that you can’t stand the peculiar green protectors you bought on sale. Whatever the reason, it’s time to pick up some new deck protectors. When that time comes, buy enough protectors to replace *everything* in your deck. Mixing new deck protectors with older ones can lead to problems because the new deck protectors really *stand out* from the others on the table. By replacing all of the protectors at once, everything in your deck looks the same.

Deck boxes

After you encase your cards in sleeves, take your efforts one step further by storing your decks in a sturdy *deck box* of some kind. Boxes come in all styles and capacities, ranging from little boxes that hold a mere handful of cards to massive cardboard boxes capable of corralling hundreds of cards at once.

For most games, the simple flip-top deck box — which looks pretty much like a recipe card box — usually works just fine. If you want something with a little more permanence and pizzazz, several companies make a basic-style box in a metal version, which looks like an oversized adhesive bandage container. These boxes hold 60 cards (a very standard deck size for most games) in plastic sleeves, or up to 100 unsleeved cards. Thanks to their handy size, these boxes give you a really easy way to protect and guard your deck during tournaments.

Some companies even found ways to innovate something as small and seemingly simple as the deck box. The big deck protector companies developed horizontal flip-top boxes for constructible games like *Pirates of the Spanish Main* from WizKids. These look like miniature recipe boxes. Their horizontal design lets you flip easily through your cards, something that the normal vertical boxes really don't do well.

The folks at Cheese Weasel Logistics (who automatically get extra points for naming their company that way) really took boxes to a new level with their *Card Coffin* line of boxes. These medium-size metal boxes include a plastic insert that creates three separate card areas, plus a spot at the end of the box for counters, dice, and such. Their boxes look really nice and they work great.



If you need to store and organize a *lot* of cards at once, turn your attention to the industry's mainstay product: white cardboard boxes. These boxes come in many sizes, ranging in capacity from 100 cards all the way up to 5,000 cards. Best of all, they're very inexpensive. Boxes designed to hold up to 1,000 cards cost between \$0.50 and \$1.50, while the giant ones go for closer to \$6.00.

Three-ring and specialty binders

Playing a trading card game sometimes feels a little like doing homework. You study the cards, memorize scads of rules, and analyze all sorts of *what if* and *maybe this* options as you attempt to find the coolest card combinations. All of this studying and thinking requires quick and easy access to all of your game cards — something that you just don't get from a box.

Many players solve this problem by using a card binder of one kind or another. Binders display either four or nine cards face-out on a page, making it easy to scan several cards at a time without handling any of them individually. The binder pockets are big enough to hold either several copies of the same card or two cards (back to back for easy reading) in their deck protectors.

Binders come in two basic types: portfolio and three-ring. A portfolio binder's pages come built-in, solidly attached to the binder cover. You can't change the number of pages or replace pages when they begin to tear (which happens to all binder pages at one point or another). You can't put the pages into a new cover. It's a one-piece item, so when it's gone, it's gone. Portfolio binders make a great storage home for your trading stock. Because the pages can't come out, you never worry about someone opening the binder accidentally and spilling page after page of your precious cards all over the floor.

You purchase a portfolio binder by its size and capacity. A binder with 4-card pages usually holds 56 cards, while one sized for 9-card pages carries 180 cards. Luckily, they don't cost much, so replacing one won't break your bank.

To make a more versatile storage unit, use a classic three-ring binder filled with loose-leaf 9-card storage pages. All of the major storage companies make these pages for three-ring binders. As for the binder itself, a quick trip to your local office supply store gives you more options than you can possibly imagine.



Although they cost a little more, I highly recommend binders with D-rings in them, rather than the traditional O-rings. A D-ring binder holds about 25 percent more pages in the same amount of space as a traditional O-ring binder, plus it holds the card pages better. The flat-sided ring design seems to deal better with the weight of trading card storage pages than the normal binders do. You can find D-ring binders at all of the big office supply stores. Expect to pay a couple dollars more for them than you would for their O-ring counterparts, but rest easy in the knowledge that they're worth every penny.

Assembling Mobile Homes for the Miniatures in Your Life

Considering that they use such tiny game pieces, the folks who play collectible miniatures games face some daunting storage problems. After just a little bit of collecting, their game pieces demand more and more space until they sometimes feel as if they should add a new room to their houses or move to bigger apartments just to keep their miniatures happy.

Don't worry — you needn't do anything as radical as that to tame your miniatures collection. Storing collectible miniatures is actually *easier* than dealing with trading card games, despite the fact that the miniatures take up significantly more space.



Start your storage plans simply with a couple of white cardboard card boxes (discussed earlier in the chapter and available from pretty much every game store on the face of the planet). Two 1,000-card boxes make a very inexpensive solution for pieces in almost every collectible miniatures game on the market. You might need something a bit larger for the “giant” pieces in some of the games, but you can address those on a case-by-case basis.

For a slightly more elegant solution, buy some clear tackle boxes from your neighborhood sporting goods store. The clear plastic boxes work well for the smaller games — particularly the boxes with removable dividers. Some players make cubbyholes for each of their figures, while others group related figures together in larger spaces. Try it both ways to see which one works best for you.



Some companies make big tackle boxes that hold several smaller boxes. Some game storage companies make them specifically for the purpose of storing miniatures. All of these designs make amazing tournament cases because you get enough room to bring several armies for the tournament, plus dice, counters, and plenty of trading stock. The nicest ones include a pull-out handle and integrated wheels so you can easily move the box from the car to the tournament. (Wheeled boxes *truly* make your life easier at the big summer game conventions; you never know how much distance you need to cover before finding the next tournament.)

Chapter 17

Challenging Your Skills in Tournaments

In This Chapter

- ▶ It all starts at home, with you and your cards
 - ▶ Venturing into the local tournament
 - ▶ Getting to know the ways you can play
 - ▶ Trying your hand at bigger tournaments
 - ▶ Dreaming the dream of professional play
-

Game players seemingly come in two major types: the ones who play the game for the joy of it, and the ones who want to win. (Technically, the “sheer joy of it” side splits into two sub-groups, but that just reopens the whole Spike, Timmy, and Johnny discussion from in Chapter 2.) Players on both sides of the fence enjoy competition, but some people simply live for it.

Regardless of your playing style and motivation, there’s a tournament level just waiting for you. Tournaments give you the opportunity to test your skills among both friends and strangers, to discover new tricks for your game by observation, and to find even *more* people to play with in your between-tournament times. Whether you play at home, at a local game store, or in one of the bigger regional or national events, tournaments bring a whole new level of fun to your game.

This chapter introduces and discusses tournament play at all levels, starting at home and going all the way to the rarified realms of the Pro Tours, where game players turn their favorite pastime into a profitable part-time (and sometimes even full-time) job. Dive in — your competition awaits!

Playing at Home

Most game players start their game-playing habit the same way: they pick up a starter of something because it either looked interesting or their friends already play it, and then they take it home and give it a try. Playing your game at home with your family and friends (or even by yourself so you can practice the rules) makes a lot of sense. It's handy, sometimes quiet, and gives you a comfortable place to make mistakes without suffering the jeers of the crowd.

To get started at home, just find a comfortable, well-lit spot, haul out your cards, and play! Begin with the basic version of the rules or with the “practice game” instructions that almost every starter set includes. The starter decks often come presorted to go with the practice game instructions. That way, they can gently introduce you to the mechanics and gameplay elements in an easy, step-by-step way.

After you feel confident with the basics, you can mix up your starter deck for a taste of the real thing. Most starters include a booster pack or an “advanced” card pack that allows you to add more options to your gameplay.



From there, take the time to read the cards in depth, go through the rules several times, and practice your game. Go to the company's Web site (listed in this book in the sections covering each game) and download the most updated rules and the Frequently Asked Questions document (also known as the FAQ). Granted, all of this reading may leave you feeling like you've got extra homework after a class, but if you want to become good at the game, you need to put in the effort. Too many players gain an *almost* solid understanding of the game and end up using incorrect play patterns. When those players move on to the next step — playing in their local tournaments — they get frustrated fast because their deck or their miniatures team gets ripped to shreds by everybody.

Starring in Local Events

When you feel comfortable with the basics of the game — and you've had the chance to add a few more cards (or figures) to your collection — pack up your favorite deck and head to a local tournament. These events give you a great opportunity to connect with players in your area, make new friends, try deck designs, swap some cards, and generally improve your skills. As an added bonus, you deepen your knowledge of the game and get a chance at some free stuff! Life just doesn't get much better than this.

The first step toward playing in the local tournament scene involves finding a venue — the place where your local tournaments happen. Most collectible game tournaments take place at a Friendly Local Game Store, although some mass-market stores (particularly Toys 'R Us and Borders) regularly offer events for particular games. Many libraries have gotten into the act as well, so look for playing opportunities there.

Start your venue search by visiting the Web site for your favorite game. Almost every Web site has a tournament locator. Punch in your state or postal code and then watch as the system lists the nearby venues. Some sites show you all of the venues within the same state, while others focus on the ones close to your location. Either way, jot down a list of the venues serving your corner of the world. Make sure you get the phone number in addition to the address so you can verify the tournament information before showing up with your stuff. Some tournaments require a fee to play, but you usually get back something extra in prizes at those events.



Some game companies require you to register through their Web site for a player ID number. This number helps them track your progress in their tournaments and gives the company the opportunity to send you things ranging from unwanted marketing messages to free goodies. If the company supporting your favorite game wants you to register, then do so before the tournament. Write your registration information (usually a username or ID number) on a handy slip of paper and put it with your game materials. Luggage tags work really well for this purpose. Just attach the tag to your game bag and you're set!

Speaking of your game bag, after you find an interesting local event, it's time to prepare for your trip. Start by double-checking the tournament format (more about that in just a moment) and then building an appropriate deck or assembling your team of miniatures. Test the deck against your "at home" opponents to make sure that you feel comfortable with how it plays and that all of your tricks and plans work the way you think they will.



Although it matters a *lot* more as you move up into the bigger and more competitive events, spending a lot of time testing and practicing your deck by playing it repeatedly gives you a distinct edge in tournament play. You don't need to read the card text or continually refer to the special abilities card; you know your deck inside and out. That lets you focus on what tricks and traps your opponent has up her sleeve rather than worrying about making sure you use a particular combination properly. I hate to sound like some demented music teacher, but if you want to win, the secret is practice, practice, practice!

When the big day comes, assemble your stuff into your handy game bag. Bring your deck or group of miniatures, plus any counters, dice, terrain, and reference materials you need. Always bring a binder or bin with your trading

stock (duplicate cards and figures you want to trade to complete or extend your collection) and your “want list” of cards or figures; you never know when someone might trade precisely what you need in exchange for exactly what you own.

Organize everything in a bag or briefcase of some kind — preferably one that zips completely shut. I use a roomy *Star Wars Episode I* briefcase with two big pockets. (I’m *such* a geek sometimes.) A box with my accessories (dice and such) goes into the front pocket, along with my deck of cards or my current miniatures team. The large back pocket holds the trading stock for whatever game I’m playing that day.



Although the vast majority of tournament players wouldn’t dream of messing with your things, you never know when a troubled individual lurks in the group. Your game bag helps you keep your gear safe and sound. After you finish playing each round in the tournament, count your deck or the figures in your team to make sure that you picked up everything from the table. Then stow your gear *in the bag*. Keep your game bag with you *at all times* during the tournament. Don’t let it out of your sight! Also, unless you need something out of it right then, *zip the bag shut*. Little steps like these protect you against those folks who like your stuff better than their own.

When you arrive at the tournament, check in with the tournament director. If you need to pay a fee of any kind, take care of that as well. Double-check the plans for the day’s tournament (type of event, special restrictions, and such) to make sure that your deck or team is legal and correctly constructed. Give your deck a final check to make sure it’s ready for the event. And, of course, introduce yourself to the other players, too — after all, half the reason you came to the tournament was to meet other game enthusiasts!



Don’t worry if some of the players seem to know more about the game than you do. They might know a lot — or they might just sound like they do. Listen and learn, ask questions, and expand your knowledge. If someone mentions a rule or ruling that sounds incorrect to you, ask the tournament director for verification. It won’t take long to separate the people who really know their stuff from the people who merely *think* they do.

When the time comes to play, the tournament director or her staff pairs you with another player for your first match. If any questions come up during the game or if you and your opponent disagree on a ruling, ask the tournament director for help right away — don’t wait! It’s much better to pause the game and get a ruling than to press on and discover that you lost the game because of an incorrect rule interpretation.



A quick guide to tournament formats

When it comes to collectible game tournaments, there's a lot more than meets the eye. You don't see old-fashioned "one loss and you're gone" elimination-style tournaments very often in game stores (although you still find them occasionally at major tournaments held at the big game conventions).

Instead, you normally find yourself playing in a Swiss-style event, in which everybody plays throughout the entire tournament, regardless of whether they win or lose in a particular round. The tournament director randomly pairs players during the first round and records the win and loss record for each player. Starting at the

second round, the director pairs winners according to their wins and losses. Winners generally play winners, and the winning-challenged face off against other winning-challenged individuals. How long the process keeps going depends on the number of players. With eight players, for instance, players usually go through five Swiss rounds before declaring a winner.

Some higher-level events mix the two formats. They start with a Swiss format to trim the playing field down to a group of finalists and then use a traditional elimination tournament to determine the ultimate winner.

After playing out the match, you and your partner report your score back to the director or her staff, who then pairs you with another player for the next round. Most collectible game tournaments use a Swiss format rather than an elimination format, so you keep playing whether you win or lose. (See the sidebar for more details about Swiss and elimination tournaments.)

At the end of the tournament (usually after playing four to six games, depending on the number of players who attend), the director ranks the players according to their win/loss record and awards the day's prizes. Game companies frequently provide special hard-to-find cards or limited-edition miniatures as prizes. The first- and second-place players typically get prizes. Most venues provide a "sportsmanship" prize as well to reward good play.

When the tournament ends, players sometimes pair off for another quick game or they swap strategies and deck-building tips. There's a lot of camaraderie among collectible game players. Make sure you spend some time getting to know your fellow players. It's part of the fun!

Playing by Style

In addition to the whole question of whether a tournament uses a Swiss or Elimination style of play, collectible games have also introduced other twists to tournament play. Such variations keep things interesting and challenging for players at all skill levels.

Constructed events cover most of the events on the average store's tournament schedule. In these, you build a deck or a miniatures team from your collection, bring it to the tournament, and do your best to win. Some tournaments put restrictions on which cards or pieces you can use in a particular format, so make sure you ask the tournament director about any special rules for your particular tourney.

The *sealed* format puts long-time collectors and new players on even footing. All of the players purchase a certain number of booster packs at the tournament and then build their decks right there from whatever they pull. Because you keep whatever you get from your booster packs, sealed tournaments make a great way to expand your collection.

Draft events make up a subsection of sealed tournaments. In a draft event, players purchase several sealed booster packs. They then sit together in groups of four or more (depending on the game) and begin the "draft" process. All players open one of their booster packs simultaneously, keep one item from the pack, and then pass the now-open pack to the player next to them. That player takes one item from the pack and passes it to the next player. This continues until the pack runs out of cards. Then the players open new packs and repeat the process again. Your deck is built from the cards you end up with at the end of this process. You keep all of the cards that you drafted, even if they came from someone else's packs.

Occasionally, game companies put on super-special tournaments in honor of new game releases or some other momentous occasion. If you hear about "marquee tournaments," "storyline tournaments," "kill and keep scenarios," or "prerelease events," you just ran across one of these special activities. Here's a quick overview:

- ✔ **Prerelease event:** In these tournaments, you get to play with the newest cards before everybody else does — sometimes weeks before! Prerelease tournaments typically take place in larger cities, with a few tournaments scattered through each region of the country. By their nature, prerelease tournaments are always sealed events.

- ✓ **Marquee tournament:** Marquee events usually celebrate the arrival of a new expansion for a game. The prize pool for marquees typically includes special goodies that you can't win anywhere else. Like pre-release events, marquees traditionally operate as sealed events.
- ✓ **Storyline tournament:** Collectible games naturally tell some kind of story, thanks to the card selections and the game's underlying theme. The storyline tournament just builds on that concept by letting the players take a hand in directing the future of the game. Companies use the overall outcome of the tournaments to destroy or enhance factions in the game in future expansions, or to direct the game's evolution in other ways.
- ✓ **"Kill and Keep" scenario:** The folks at WizKids pioneered this concept in the collectable gaming world, and still do a great job with it. In a "kill and keep" scenario, the players pit themselves against each other just like normal, but they also fight another army run by the judge. Whenever players kill something in the judge's army, they keep the figure or card for their collection. WizKids makes this even more interesting by including super-sized items like dragons and space ships in their "kill and keep" scenarios.



Game companies typically announce special events like these on their Web sites. The local retailer usually tells the world about the tournament as well because they're so special. Try to play in these events whenever you can. The fun and the prizes make these events a great time!

Moving Up to Regionals and Nationals

After honing your skills in some local tournaments, you get comfortable with the game and the rules, and you start establishing yourself as a player. You learn the intricacies of card combinations (sometimes by getting them inflicted on you during games), and probably come up with more than a few tricks of your own. You also find out which Web sites the other players go to for strategy and deck-building ideas and start going there (and other places), too.

But at some point, you get used to playing against your regular opponents. You know what they do, how they react, what they like in their decks, and how their strategies play out during the game. Rather than innovating and finding new combinations, you might start building decks and teams that target the way the local players do things. Slowly, your game enjoyment sickens, withers, and dies. It's just not fun anymore.

Regional and national tournaments help you break out of the “local tournament blues” and experience your favorite game at a whole new level. More players, more strategies, more challenges — these events give you *more* of everything.

Because these tournaments bring together such a huge number of game fans, the companies behind the games frequently send designers and other representatives. Not only can you play the game you love, you get a chance to meet the people behind the scenes, too. How cool is that?



Due to the event's size, many regional and national events take place during game conventions (like the ones in the massive trading card game halls of Origins, shown in Figure 17-1). In that case, you need a convention badge in order to play, plus you must purchase a ticket for the event itself. For more about the fun of the big conventions, check the game company Web sites for information. They all sponsor special events at the big summer conventions. Even if you can't play in one of their regional or national tourneys, the special convention events make the trip worthwhile.



Figure 17-1: Summer conventions like the Origins International Game Expo welcome lots of players.

Photo courtesy of GAMA.

Almost every regional and national tournament includes both an “open” and an “invitational” side. The “open” section takes place on the first day of the tournament, when anybody who wants to play can join the fun. The top players from the first day of open play advance to the second day.

Meanwhile, the people who won tournaments leading up to this one start playing on day two. By winning one of the local tournaments, they won an “invitation” to the big event and got to avoid the crowds on the first day.



Like the big events themselves, the game companies always do a great job promoting the qualifying tournaments. Watch the company Web site for all of the details!

So how do you get involved in these awesome events? First, practice your game. And then practice some more. After that . . . well, you get the idea. Playing in a high-level tournament demands high-level skills. You build those skills by playing in all of the local tournaments you can, plus playing extra games with your friends. The more you play, the better you get. (Sure, it sounds simple, but sometimes that’s the only way it works.)

Along with that, read the discussion areas for strategies and ideas. Find out what decks work really well right now. If you have the cards to build them, give them a try. Can you make the deck better? Keep trying new things — it makes the practice all the more tolerable.

When you feel ready, grab your gear and head off to the nearest big event. Make sure it includes an “open” day so you can play! (And don’t ask me why I know that you should check on this. It’s pretty embarrassing.)



Attend your first big tournament with the goal of learning a lot and having fun. Wanting to win is fine, but remember that you’re entering a whole new level of competition. During one of my first national tourney experiences, I got paired with a really nice fellow for my first game. He didn’t just beat me — he *destroyed* me in the first 7 minutes of the 50-minute round. He went on to win the national championship, so that takes away much of the pain. More importantly, I learned a *lot* of new strategy during that game, which helped me play a lot better in my local tournaments. (Plus, I had a year’s worth of questionable bragging rights for serving as the “first stepping stone on the national champion’s walk of victory.”)

Going Pro for Fame and Fortune

Buried somewhere deep in your subconscious sits a secret hope that someday, somehow, someone might pay you for playing a game. It’s the ultimate score for game lovers everywhere — the thought that all of those hours spent building decks and analyzing strategies could turn into cash in your pocket. Mmm . . . what a sweet thought!

For a lot of players, it's more than a thought — it's a reality of everyday life. Thanks to the various professional-level events, you get a shot at the ultimate gamer lifestyle. Travel all over the United States and the world; test your skills against the best players on the planet; earn the respect of the gaming community. You get all that and more by competing at this level — if, of course, you play the right games and you play them really, really well.

Right now, two companies sponsor professional-level tournaments for their games. Wizards of the Coast puts on its long-running worldwide Pro Tour for *Magic: The Gathering*. Upper Deck created the UDE Pro Circuit for its *Vs. System* superhero game. Both companies put up a \$1 million prize fund for their tours, making it possible for the top players to bring home thousands of dollars from every event.



Many other companies put on cash-prize events at major conventions around the country, but none of them rival the rarified world of the professional-level tournament series. Check the game companies' Web sites for news about cash-prize events for your favorite games!

To get into the professional-level tournaments, you need an invitation. Average players need not apply! Players vie for invitations at pro event qualifying tournaments held all over the country. The top players in each event earn the right to play in the professional series events.

Depending on the game, you might also get into the pro events simply by playing really, really well in your local and regional tournaments. Wizards of the Coast, for instance, gives automatic Pro Tour invitations to the top 50 players in the world (assuming the players didn't qualify for the Pro Tour on their own).

To learn more about the Upper Deck Pro Circuit, visit <http://entertainment.upperdeck.com/op/vsop>. For information about the *Magic: The Gathering* Pro Tour, go to www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=protour.

Chapter 18

Turning Collectibles into Profitables with eBay

In This Chapter

- ▶ Selecting your selling stock
 - ▶ Telling the world about your stuff
 - ▶ Boxing and sending the winnings
-

Wouldn't you love to make some money from your favorite game? Sure, you can always practice hard, play a lot, and try to make the professional tournaments like the ones mentioned in Chapter 17, but not everybody can play at that level. (Goodness knows *I* can't!) Is there any hope for the rest of us to squeeze a few bucks from our favorite games?

Ya know, it's funny you should ask . . .

Thanks to the bizarrely wonderful world of collectible games, you *can* make money from your favorite game even if you don't go pro. In fact, it's not only possible, it's downright probable — and a lot easier than you might think. Sure, you need to watch out for pitfalls here and there, avoid a few easy-to-make mistakes, and put some effort into the whole project, but if you do things right, you can make your game into a delightfully positive cash flow in addition to a great pastime.

This chapter looks at the wild world of buying and selling collectible game stuff on eBay. It helps you rate what you own, find ways to successfully turn it into money, and then turn that money into a bigger collection (and possibly even *more* money) with careful purchases. Along the way, you find out some interesting tidbits about buying and selling on eBay and get a quick primer on how to pack and ship your stuff to ensure safe travel.



Approach all of this buying and selling with a touch of caution. No matter how many successful transactions take place, the chance that someone might try to rip you off constantly looms over you. In more than eight years of online buying and trading, nothing has gone wrong for me thus far, but that doesn't mean that it won't. Enter into transactions slowly and carefully, and watch out for yourself. I approach things that way every time I buy or trade something, and you should as well.



This chapter covers only the barest beginnings of selling on eBay. Other people out there have written whole books on the subject, so I highly recommend picking up one of those tomes for more detailed information. In particular, take a look at *eBay For Dummies*, 4th Edition, by Marsha Collier (Wiley). It's an amazing book — in fact, that's how I learned the basics of eBay. Pick up your copy today!

Picking, Pondering, and Pricing

It would be nice if you could just decide that you want to sell something and then skip straight to the part where you begin spending the money you got for it. Alas, things don't work that way (which just proves that you and I didn't create the universe — but I digress). Instead, the online selling process looks more like a geometry problem in which point A leads to point B via points C, D, E, and possibly a short detour in the vicinity of point F. And, as if that weren't enough by itself, you don't *get* to point B at all if nobody buys your stuff!

To make the most frequent (and profitable) trips between points A and B, you need to approach your online selling with careful research and a degree of patience. Before listing anything on eBay — even before writing the first word of your auction description — you need to figure out what people want, select the items in your collection that best meet those desires (and that you're willing to sell), and then set your price. Then, after all of that, you can write the description and launch your online sale.



Please don't skip the research step and jump straight to listing your game goodies. If you do that, your stuff won't sell for as much money — period. First-time sellers make a lot of common mistakes that result in bargains for expert shoppers. I learned this the hard way during one of my first eBay sales, and the lesson cost me a tidy sum of money. To maximize your profits, take this process one step at a time. It makes a difference. Really!

Searching the system

Start by searching eBay for the products that you want to sell. Try every variation of the product name and description that you can think of. Use these ideas as a start and then mix and match from there:

- ✓ **Manufacturer's name:** AEG, Bandai, WizKids, Wizards of the Coast
- ✓ **Product's overall name:** *Marvel HeroClix*, *Star Wars Miniatures*, *Clout Fantasy*
- ✓ **Names of specific sets:** *Fantastic Forces*, *Revenge of the Sith*, *Thundercharge of Ultra Destruction*
- ✓ **Product description:** rare, limited edition, foil, chase, booster, display (for a whole box of booster packs)
- ✓ **Split words:** "Hero Clix" instead of "HeroClix," "Inu Yasha" instead of "Inuyasha"
- ✓ **Abbreviations:** LOTR for *Lord of the Rings*, FF for *Fantastic Forces*, WK for WizKids, WOTC for Wizards of the Coast, LE for limited edition
- ✓ **Misspellings and typos:** "Whizkids," "Star Warts," plus just about any other misspelling you can imagine, especially those that a computer spell checker would miss
- ✓ **Singular forms of plural words:** "Wizard of the Coast," "WizKid," "Star War"



Capitalization doesn't matter to eBay at all. If you get the right letters into your search, eBay figures out which products you want. Spelling counts, but not as much. If eBay thinks that you misspelled a word, it proactively suggests a correct spelling based on matches in the system. Pretty cool stuff, eh?

To begin a search on eBay, go through these steps:

- 1. Pull out a piece of paper and some kind of writing implement.**
Take notes on your search results as you go. Write down the search terms that you use and the results that you receive.
- 2. Point your Web browser to www.ebay.com.**
The main eBay screen appears.
- 3. Sign in to the system by clicking the Sign In link at the top of the page and entering your username and password.**

Although you can search without signing in, you might as well just get it over with now instead of waiting. Besides, you can't search completed auctions without signing into the system. (You learn why that's important a little later in the chapter. For now, just trust me.)

4. Begin your search by clicking in the search box at the top of the screen and typing a few words.

Make sure that you write down the search term(s) you use so you can track which ones give the best results. Use the bullets above to help generate ideas for your searches.



You can find a search box at the top of your *My eBay* window and at the top of most eBay screens. If all else fails, just click the My eBay link in the menu bar at the top of the window.

5. Launch your search by clicking the Search button.

After a few moments (or longer, depending how eBay feels at the moment), the system displays a big list of auctions matching your search term(s).

6. Look through the search results.

Did this term do a good job of finding just the game products you want to sell, or did it catch a lot of irrelevant items?



Write down your thoughts as you work. You want to come out of this with a solid list of keywords to use in your auction title, plus some insight into product popularity and pricing. Keep writing notes so you don't forget something important!

7. Keep trying new combinations of search terms to see what pops up.

And keep writing your notes!

In addition to searching the active auctions, make sure you look in the *completed items* list. This very powerful search option displays products only from auctions that recently closed.



Why do you care about completed auctions? And just what the heck are you looking for in all of these searches, anyway? First, you want to know what sold and what didn't. Second, you want an idea of what the sale prices look like. Both pieces of information help as you get into the next steps of the selling process: picking what to sell and setting your prices.

To prowl through the completed auctions, follow these steps:

1. Begin your search normally by typing a term or terms into the search text box and clicking the Search button.

You can find a search box at the top of most eBay screens. If all else fails, go to the main www.ebay.com page.



2. When the search results come back, scroll down the page a little until you see the Search Options area on the left side of the screen. Click the check box next to Completed Listings.

With this check box turned on, eBay shows only finished auctions in your search listing.

3. With the Completed Listing check box checked, click the Show Items button.

The system now lists completed items that match your search criteria, in order from the most recently ended auction onward.

To do a normal search of current auctions, repeat steps 2 and 3, but uncheck the Completed Listing check box instead of turning it on.



At this point, turn your attention to the notes you wrote during your research time. Scan through the list of search terms and see which ones appeared more often than the others. For instance, if the vast majority of auctions used *HeroClix* instead of *HC*, then you want to include *HeroClix* in your auction title (assuming, of course, that's what you plan to sell). Pay close attention to the way that auctions describe expansion set names, card titles, and card numbers.

Crafting a title

You are allowed a mere 55 characters in the title of an eBay auction, so you need to pack as much information into that space as you can. If you use several of the most popular keywords in the title, your auctions get found by more people. And the more people who find the auction, the more bids you get — or at least that's how it *should* work, provided your price and item meets the buyer's expectations.



When selling collectible game goods, your title should include the following:

- ✓ Name of the game
- ✓ Name of the set
- ✓ Item title
- ✓ Collector's number or other identifier for the individual piece

Of course, packing that much information into 55 characters usually requires some abbreviations. That's where the information you gathered during the research step comes into play. Look at the most common abbreviations used in auctions for your game and apply them to your auction title.



Don't invent your own *very cool* abbreviation for a game, expansion, or anything else. Creativity is a wonderful thing, but not when it comes to writing auction descriptions. If you shorten *Magic: The Gathering 9th Edition* to *M9E* in your auction title, nobody will find your auction. If you use *Magic 9* instead, you end up offering cards to people looking for a jersey from one-time Orlando Magic forward Gerald Wilkins. Granted, you might get some crossover appeal there, but probably not enough to give your cards a good selling price.

Setting your price and auction length

Now we hit the big question behind every auction: What opening price should you use? Like everything else in the world (and in your favorite game), the answer depends on several factors. Thanks to the power of the auction sale format, you can't go *too* far wrong no matter where you put your price, although if you set your opening price too low, you occasionally sell something for less than your customer was really willing to pay.

Many of the same things that drive the auction price also affect your auction length. Generally speaking, the longer an auction appears on eBay, the better closing price you get. But sometimes that strategy backfires — especially in the world of collectible game merchandise.



When picking a starting price and the auction length, focus on the item's popularity. Are there many of this item for sale on eBay right now? Do people bid on the auctions? How much did the buyers pay in the closed auctions? Is the closing price dropping, staying the same, or increasing of late? After you uncover this information, you can apply some very simple rules for setting your opening price and your auction length:

- ✓ **High-interest, readily available product:** Start your auction with a low opening price. Because lots of people actively want the item, you might as well save some money on the auction listing fee by starting low and letting your buyers bid it up. Set your auction length relatively low, probably to either three or five days. Figures and cards from new expansions fall into this category, as do relatively mundane items that make a big splash in championship decks or armies. For example, few people bought or played the **Knights Immortal** chariot for *Mage Knight*. But then a player figured out a devastating way to use the chariot and won the national championship with that army. Overnight, *everybody* wanted the **Knights Immortal** chariot. Buyer interest remained high for months, as did the supply of chariots.

- ✓ **High interest, rarely available product:** These very special items often come from the big summer game conventions, new release tournaments, or pre-release events. Because of their unique nature, a large number of them typically appear on eBay within a couple weeks of the event, but after that, the items almost never surface again. In fact, you will often find stacks of promo cards and figures at low prices at conventions later down the road. In these cases, the item price stays unreasonably high for the first few days and then starts dropping like a rock. Make sure you post items like this immediately after the event where you got them. Because the first few sales command the highest price, you want to get your item up there soon so someone can throw money at you right away. Like the auctions mentioned in the previous bullet, the high customer interest lets you use a low opening bid. However, you want to keep this auction *as short as possible* (so you can sell your item before eBay is flooded with them), so you definitely want a three-day duration on this. You might even consider running it as a one-day auction, but that's very aggressive. Unless the item is really, *really* popular, the one-day format might backfire on you because your bidders simply miss the auction.
- ✓ **Low interest, readily available product:** Here, you start the auction with a medium to low opening bid but let it run for seven days. People can get the product easily, so you need to entice them with either low cost and low shipping or by bundling the item with something that falls into one of the “high interest” categories above. You *can* sell these things online, but it takes time and usually requires multiple auction listings. By bundling it with something nicer, you might get a slightly better price than by selling this one on its own.
- ✓ **Low interest, rarely available product:** This type of product defines the word *niche*. These goodies give eBay its reputation as the repository of the weird, strange, and generally hard-to-find. In the collectible game arena, these things also provide you with an opportunity to make some surprising amounts of money. When selling something that falls into this category, set a high opening bid and a long duration — definitely seven days. Put your minimum bid just slightly below the amount you think the item will bring at the auction's close. You can't count on other people to drive up the auction price, so you need to take the situation into your own hands and *make* the bidder give you a higher price for this thing.



Use the *Buy It Now* option very carefully. On one hand, it lets you sell an item right away to get the most profit from it. However, if you set the price too low, you make less than you would have otherwise.



Buy It Now pricing works really well for things that fall into the “high interest, rarely available product” category. In that case, set the *Buy It Now* price according to similar auctions’ closing amounts. For example, if the last few auctions for a special limited-edition convention card commanded \$50, \$49, \$49, and \$45, open your auction low (like \$9.95), but include a *Buy It Now* price of \$43 to \$46. A buyer who *really* wants the item usually just pays your price rather than waiting out an auction, especially when the auction will probably close in the same vicinity as your *Buy It Now* price anyway. In these cases, convenience and speed become your auction’s key benefits over the competition.

Grading and Describing Your Goods

Trading cards with your friends at the Friendly Local Game Store is one thing; you have the card right there in your hand and everybody involved can see how perfect (or imperfect) it actually is. Selling online is something different. Things work very differently when you start selling online.

When you sell things online, only *you* actually see the item in your auction. Your customer relies on you to give accurate and complete information about the item — hopefully with a photograph or two as well. If you do a good job describing your goods, then your buyer feels confident purchasing from you because she knows what she’s getting. If you do a poor job with the descriptions, then your items don’t command as strong a price because you left questions in people’s minds. Worse yet, your customers might complain or demand a refund because they thought that they were getting a different item than they received.



Always give *more* information rather than *less*. Your online buyer can’t hold the card. He probably doesn’t know you personally. The buyer must base his entire purchase decision on the text that you write and the images you include in your auction description. The more details you provide with your words and photographs, the fewer misunderstandings you have with customers. (And that’s a good thing — a *really* good thing.)

Take a look at the following auction descriptions. Both of these represent very common, real-world examples of auctions that appeared on eBay. Assuming you play the game in question and you really want this particular card, which of these descriptions gives you more confidence as a buyer and makes you want to bid on the card?

Example of a bad description: “Edward Elric” card for Full Metal Alchemist game. They gave these away at a convention I went to. In good shape. Not bent. I ship fast.

Example of a good description: Rare “staff” convention promo “Edward Elric, Quick Thinker” card from the Fullmetal Alchemist game by Joyride Studios/RC2 (www.fma-tcg.com). This is one of the special “staff” convention promo cards. To get it, you had to find the right staff member in the company’s convention booth and ask for the card. The card is in mint/near mint condition, with good corners, nicely centered artwork, and no nicks on the sides. The card back shows two very faint straight scratches from the packing process. I put it directly into a deck protector on the convention floor and then transferred it to a soft sleeve inside a solid top loader at home. It ships in the soft sleeve and top loader, packed in a small bubble envelope. Buy more and save money! You can combine shipping on up to 10 cards for a flat fee of \$3.00. [Click here to see my other CCG/TCG auctions.](#) [Click the Contact the Seller link above to ask me any questions about this auction.](#) I’m always glad to help!

The first description tells you nothing useful about the card’s condition (although it’s nice to know that the card isn’t “bent” and that the seller “ships fast”). The seller forgot to include the full name of the card, plus he misspelled the name of the game by splitting it into two words. The seller comes across sounding like a bored salesperson who doesn’t know anything about the game or the card and just wants to make some quick money. This ad practically screams “run away, customer — take your money elsewhere! Don’t buy from me!”

In contrast, the second ad takes a very professional and complete approach to the sale. This ad not only gives you detailed background about the card (establishing its origin, rarity, and care) but also clearly describes the condition of the card itself. It goes into detail about how the seller has taken care of the card and how he will pack the card for a safe trip to your doorstep. (The top loader is a nice touch. It’s a rigid plastic sleeve specially made for protecting trading cards.) and then invites you to save money by spending more (which, strange as it seems, really works). There’s no contest here — ad number two wins this contest hands-down.

At the heart of the second description sits a quick, basic evaluation of the card’s condition — in this case, “mint/near mint.” Most auctions and traders use the same basic scale, although each person grades a little differently. The following condition descriptions give you a good start toward evaluating your stuff:

- ✔ **Mint cards** represent absolute perfection in the creation process. Cards in this class feature centered artwork, perfect colors, and crisp edges. Only a few cards — even among the ones that come straight from the pack — ever reach this level of perfection.

- ✓ **Near mint/Mint cards** come unplayed, straight from a pack. They can still show some small, simple problem: Artwork that's off-center just a bit, thin scratch lines from the pack-making machinery, or some other glitch brings a card down from Mint to Near Mint. When you open a new pack of cards, most of the cards you pull rank as Near mint/Mint.
- ✓ **Near mint cards** usually come direct from packs as well. They frequently show the same problems as the Near mint/Mint grading level, except these cards often carry two or more of the problems at once.
- ✓ **Fine cards** probably saw playing time in your decks, but definitely in sleeves. You can see some surface scuffing and minor scratches, and maybe even a tiny touch of white at the edges.
- ✓ **Good quality cards** earn their keep with a lot of sleeved play. You definitely need sleeves to play these cards; they tend to show how much they got played.
- ✓ Finally, **poor quality cards** look worse than good quality ones. You might find a tear or rip on a card, or perhaps a crease. This card fought the good fight for you, and its condition shows scars from the battle.



TIP

In general, it pays to judge your stuff harshly. If you think a card's condition sits between Near Mint and Fine, go toward the lower side of the scale. In your auction text, tell the buyer what you see: *I think this looks a little nicer than Fine, but you'll probably call it Near Mint or better.* If you're honest, your customers will love you for things like this. eBay includes a feedback feature, and buyers pay attention to the kind of feedback you've received from past auctions and take it into consideration before making a purchase. Honesty + good customer service = good feedback.



TIP

Launching your first eBay auction

All of the searching, thinking, writing, and photography doesn't do any good without actually launching an auction on eBay. The final few steps of sending your auction into action take only a few minutes, particularly if you already created the auction title and most of the auction text. eBay's system walks you through the selling steps very well — after all, they *want* you to sell things!

eBay constantly adds new features and capabilities to its auction system, so the precise

steps to listing an auction change every few months. For the best information, I recommend going through eBay's online selling tutorial at <http://pages.ebay.com/help/newtoebay/questions/sell-item.html>. It lists the basic steps and offers a step-by-step video that takes you from signing up for an eBay account all the way through listing your first auction. I highly recommend it!

If the card or figure shows some wear due to play, tell the buyer about it in the description. You don't need to dwell on the bad stuff, but you must play fair with your customers. Tell them the good *and* the bad. If you don't know whether to mention something in your description or not, think of it this way: If you were purchasing this same item from someone online, would *you* expect the seller to tell you about the flaw?

Make sure you include a nice, clear photo of the item, too. This will ensure the buyer that she is bidding on exactly the card she's looking for and also help her ascertain a little more about the card's condition. You can refer to *eBay For Dummies* for tips on how to best photograph the items you auction.

Packing and Shipping for Safe Arrival

When someone buys and pays for your items, it's time for the last step in your online selling process: shipping the order. Although your work on the auction text got the sale rolling and convinced the buyer to pick up your stuff, this final step is important, too — it puts the product into your customer's hands. If you don't take the time to do this right, your goods might get damaged in shipment, which leaves you with a frustrated buyer and mangled stuff — truly a mess. To avoid those problems (at least most of the time), invest some money in your preparations and do a high-quality packing job on every order.

If you plan to regularly sell items on eBay (or trade them through online discussion boards), you need to assemble a basic set of shipping supplies. The exact amount you spend depends on how much you plan to sell and trade. For a good starting setup, expect to spend \$30 or so on supplies. Here's what to get:



- ✓ **Top loaders and “penny sleeves”:** These keep your trading cards safe from the bumps and grinds of shipping. Although you can find them from a lot of companies, I tend to stick with UltraPro #81145 top loaders and RPSCG-3 soft card sleeves, a soft plastic envelope. The sleeve prevents scratches, while the top loader guards against folds and bends — and the whole thing fits nicely into the small bubble envelope mailers mentioned in the next bullet.

Check out Chapter 16 for the low-down on choosing and purchasing supplies for protecting and transporting your cards and miniatures.

- ✓ **Bubble envelope mailers:** If you sell single cards, you absolutely need these. The #000 size mailers work great with standard top loaders. The envelopes have about a 4-x-7-inch inside space, which gives the top loader some room without too much wiggle.

- ✓ **One or two 100-foot rolls of bubble wrap:** Small bubbles work best for single miniature game figures, while large bubbles help fill up the extra space around trading card game booster displays.
- ✓ **A hand-held tape dispenser with 2-inch-wide packing tape:** You can find almost any price and quality of tape out there, but I prefer using Scotch 3710 tape. I briefly tried some really cheap shipping tape instead of my favorite Scotch tape once and found myself using twice as much with awful results. Now, I use only Scotch (the tape, that is, not the liquor).

As you might expect, you can find all of these items for sale on eBay. Buying your supplies through eBay not only saves you some money, but also gives a new seller some all-important positive entries for the online feedback system. Beginning your sales career with something other than zero feedback gives your buyers more confidence than if you have no feedback at all.



If you ship things with Priority Mail through the U.S. Postal Service, you get boxes and envelopes for free — and nothing helps your profit margin quite like free stuff! To order free boxes, envelopes, mailing labels, and other supplies, go to www.usps.com and click the Supplies link on the site's front page (as Figure 18-1 shows). From there, select the Priority Mail boxes and envelopes you need. The Postal Service ships everything directly to your house at no charge.

The screenshot shows the USPS website in a Mozilla Firefox browser window. The address bar displays <http://www.usps.com/>. The page header includes the USPS logo and navigation links: [Home](#) | [Sign In](#). Below the header is a navigation bar with links: [Find a ZIP Code](#) / [Calculate Postage](#) / [Print a Shipping Label](#) / [Schedule a Pickup](#) / [Locate a Post Office](#) / [Track & Confirm](#). The main content area features a search bar and a 'Track & Confirm' section. Below this is a 'Shipping Supplies' section with three columns of links: 'Shipping Tools', 'Mailing Tools', and 'Receiving Your Mail'. The footer contains copyright information and links to 'Postal Inspectors' and 'Inspector General'.

Figure 18-1:
The U.S. Postal Service offers free supplies straight from its Web site.



Supporting the place where you play

Everybody loves saving money (me included), and you can do that with some careful online shopping. But please don't get carried away with the thought of picking up everything you need online. Those Internet vendors might offer low prices, but they fall woefully short in one very important area: They *don't* give you a place to meet people and enjoy your game. When it's time to play, you turn to the game space and the friendly faces at your Friendly Local Game Store.

To put it bluntly, you need to *pay where you play*. The tournament space at the local game store costs the retailer money. If you walk into the store, play in the tournament, and walk back out without buying anything, you aren't doing your

part to support the Friendly Local Game Store. I'm not telling you to blindly pay full retail price for everything, but I *am* saying that you need to spend part of your gaming dollars locally.

If you support your Friendly Local Game Store by playing in the sealed booster events and by purchasing boosters, sleeves, boxes, and such, then your game store can afford to support you and your game. You and the local game store need each other — one can't survive without the other. If you enjoy playing at the local store, then reward them with your money.

Yes — it's really *that* important.

The USPS offers boxes and envelopes in a variety of sizes and shapes, but a few really stand out for shipping game materials. Here's a quick overview of the best ones:

- ✔ If you sell single cards, pick up the video-sized Priority Mail Box (O-1096S), the Small Priority Mail Envelope (EP 14-B), the Priority Mail Flat Rate Envelope (EP 14-F), and the Priority Mail Tyvek Envelope (EP 14). Although I rely on the boxes most of the time, the Tyvek envelope provides some flexibility when shipping odd-sized things.
- ✔ To send boosters and booster displays, get the large Priority Mail Box (O-BOX7) or the Priority Mail Flat Rate Box (O-FRB1). Both of these work really well for larger items.
- ✔ For shipping collectible miniatures, start with the mug-sized Priority Mail Box (O-BOX4), the large Priority Mail Box (O-BOX7), and maybe the Priority Mail Flat Rate Box (O-FRB1). The large video Priority Mail Box (O-1096L) also does a good job with these items.
- ✔ Regardless of what you sell, add a few of the Priority Mail Address Labels (LABEL 228) and Priority Mail Sticker Pads (LABEL 107). If you ever need to use your own box, these labels and stickers make sure it gets handled correctly as Priority Mail.

Because it sometimes takes a couple of weeks for the boxes to arrive, you can also go to your local post office and pick up a few boxes and envelopes — enough to get started, at least. If you don't see the box or envelope that you want, ask the folks at the desk. They sometimes keep extra supplies behind the counter.

Chapter 19

Volunteering for Fun, Frolic, and Freebies

In This Chapter

- ▶ The game industry needs *you*
 - ▶ Exploring the world of opportunities
 - ▶ Diving into a product champion program
-

They demonstrate games at conventions, help in the manufacturer booths, and even run the convention itself (usually while wearing the coolest T-shirts). They show up at the local game stores, running tournaments and teaching new players. They carry titles like Ambassadors, Bounty Hunters, Envoys, Flight Crew, Seniors, and Warlords. They work hard, play hard, and enjoy a camaraderie (and incredible goodies) that mere mortals only hope for. Who are these amazing people — and, more to the point, how do you join them?

Welcome to the world of volunteering, game industry–style. From the local tournament at your favorite game store to the national finals at the big summer conventions, collectible game companies rely on waves of volunteer product champions to spread the good word about their games. And if you love your game and want to share that enthusiasm with others, you might be exactly the right person for this amazingly fun job.

Regardless of what you play, where you live, and (sometimes) how old you are, the game industry needs *you*. This chapter introduces the volunteer possibilities out there, explains how to find product champion opportunities that interest you, shows you how to prepare and apply for the job ahead, and maybe brags a little bit about the overall coolness of donating your time for the games — and the conventions — that you know and love.

The game industry needs *you!* Dive into the chapter and find out where you fit. It's a great adventure filled with fun, friends, and fantastic stuff!

Describing the Ultimate Volunteer

What makes a great game company volunteer? Is it your amazing skill at playing a particular game? Maybe it's knowing someone really important inside the company? Or perhaps spending tons of money collecting all of the cards in each set to show your unwavering dedication to your game?

Nope — wipe those thoughts from your mind. None of those things really make a whit of difference toward getting selected as a game company volunteer. It's much simpler — and, at the same time, *harder* — than all of that.



First and foremost, you need something that you can't get from a rule book or card spoiler list: You need to *love interacting with people*, particularly people who never saw or heard of your favorite game before meeting you.

Working as a game company volunteer means people, people, and *more* people. If you can smile, help, support, cajole, inspire, and excite people of all ages, shapes, and sizes (and sometimes *odors*), then you might have a future as a product champion. If you *don't* enjoy the whole "people" thing, then please *don't* volunteer for your favorite game because, if you somehow get chosen to help, you'll probably end up doing more damage to the game than good.

If you pass the "people" challenge, then so far, so good. That's definitely the hardest test for any potential product champion. After all, it's one thing to swap stories at the end of a tournament with a bunch of folks who share your appreciation and competitiveness in a game, but it's quite another to teach someone who never touched a trading card game before that moment.

Next, you need *solid product knowledge*, including a strong understanding of the rules. Do you know how your game works, from building a deck to winning a tournament? Can you unravel the mysteries of strange card combinations that would twist the designer's mind into a pretzel? When rule changes appear on the company Web site, do you keep up with them and look for how they affect your play? Can you describe the overall playing themes from various sets for your game? If that sounds like you, that's a good sign.

In addition to having all that product knowledge under your belt, you absolutely *must* have good communication skills. You don't need to wax eloquent for hours about the choice of one card over another, but if you can't explain how your game's turn sequence works or why this special ability trumps another special ability, then you probably need some practice. Clear communication makes the difference between a good volunteer and a great one.

Volunteers also need a willingness to *work hard*, even when they don't feel like it. Sure, product champions get neat prizes to reward them for their efforts, but the volunteers who care only about the rewards don't last very long when the bumper of their dreams smacks into the brick wall of reality. Nobody whose one and only reason to volunteer involves getting as many goodies as he can is going to be asked to volunteer again the following year.

Take conventions, for instance. Working in the manufacturer's booth at one of the big summer conventions represents the pinnacle of achievement for many volunteers. But if you've never demonstrated games in a booth before, you have *no* idea how much energy the work sucks out of you. Only the folks who really love their game keep going with a smile during the 100th demonstration of the day.



In addition to everything else, most game companies won't accept official volunteers under 18 years old, although some go down to 16 years old depending on the state. Because most product champions need to sign official volunteer contracts, the company needs people of legal age to do such things. (Other things like liability and child labor laws affect this as well, but you knew that already.)

Starting Locally, Finishing Globally

Most everything in our industry starts at the local store level — your Friendly Local Game Store. That's where your volunteer career starts, too. Although you might think this sounds like pretty humble beginnings — away from the glamour and the crowds of a convention — it's actually the single most important place a product champion works.

At the local store, you represent both the game company and the games that company makes. Companies rely on you as the “face” of their games among the buyers and players in your hometown. Your work in the local store makes a good impression about the company, shares your passion for the games, and ultimately helps the retailer sell more product. You do that through demonstrations, promotions, tournaments, and special events:

- ✓ **Game demonstrations** represent the first step toward getting new players for a game. Here, you quickly hit the highlights of the game, focusing on the fun without going into depth about the rules and details.
- ✓ **Tournaments** help you build a solid base of players for your game. These events happen regularly, usually every week or two. They usually last for two to six hours, depending on the game and the number of players who attend. Tournaments bring your product knowledge into play, as well as those all-important people skills. As the product champion, you organize the tournament, but you also judge it.

- ✓ From time to time, game companies run special **promotions** designed to increase interest and inspire new players. These usually involve some combination of demonstrations and tournaments, seasoned with some really cool goodies from the game company's prize vault. Most companies only do one or two promotions each year, but that rarity just makes the events all the more fun.
- ✓ **Special events** let you show your creativity to the local players, the store owner, and the company you represent. Volunteers usually drive special events on their own, but you might get some help from the local players and the game company. A special game event usually centers around a scenario you developed or heard about from another volunteer, a very rare and powerful game piece that you or the retailer received from the company, or a particular tournament format that your players really, really enjoy but rarely get to play.

Although most of these activities focus on the game players and buyers, product champions also interact quite a lot with the store owners. You provide owners with the latest information about upcoming products and help them understand what's happening with the game you represent. The game company gives you advanced information so you can share it with the retailers. That information helps the retailer plan her product purchases.

When combined with all of your player-oriented activities, the time you spend working with the store owner completes your circle of effort. You help the store owner understand what to keep on the shelves, and you educate and excite the players about buying the game. It's a pretty cool combination!

As you gain more experience at the local level, opportunities come around to help at local, regional, and national conventions. Smaller conventions take place year-round, while the major national ones typically take place during the summertime, from Memorial Day through Labor Day. Conventions range in size from a few hundred people at the local level up to 15,000 to 25,000 at the major national ones.



Don't expect to start working these big events right away. You need time to develop and polish your skills at home before jumping into the "big time" work at a convention. When you feel comfortable and confident at the local venue, then give convention work a try.

Helping at a convention looks a lot like working with a local store, except that everything feels bigger and busier. Depending on your company's presence at the convention, you might split your time between demonstrating the game to new players and running tournaments, or you may focus on one or the other. At the really big conventions, volunteers sometimes help run the booth itself by restocking product and bagging orders in the company's on-site store.

As you gain even more experience, the company may tap you as a volunteer leader. In this capacity, you take responsibility for one section of a large convention — or even the company's entire presence at a smaller one! You plan the event schedule, recruit and organize other volunteers, and coordinate with the convention sponsors to make sure that your game gets well-represented in front of the players. It's a big job for sure, but it's a lot of fun. (After running several smaller conventions myself, I can vouch for both the delight and the occasional frustration of working at this level. Even so, I wouldn't trade those times and memories for anything. It's a blast!)

Getting Involved at a New Level

If all of this sounds interesting, then visit your game company's Web site to find out precisely what they require of their volunteers. The companies usually list their product champion information under whatever they call their team, like the WizKids *Envoys* or the AEG (Alderac Entertainment Group) *Bounty Hunters*.



Almost every game company Web site asks you to register with the site before applying as a volunteer. It only makes sense, particularly considering that they need a way to contact you and you need access to their special volunteer-only online areas. When you set up your account on the Web site, choose your user ID carefully because that's how other people in the product champion program will get to know you online. If you're trying to champion a game like *Magic*, you probably don't *really* want to volunteer under the moniker *HelloKitty*.

When you find the volunteer information, *read it carefully*. Companies aren't shy about telling you precisely what they expect and what they offer in return. Most game companies expect their volunteers to run at least one or two tournaments each month. Some add demonstration requirements, too. Before diving into the volunteer program, take the time to understand the commitment you're making.



If your game company wants more than you can give, don't feel discouraged. You might not be comfortable teaching others to play your game, but you could still help set-up and tear down booths at a convention or check badges at the door. If it doesn't work out for you to volunteer for a company at all, you can still volunteer informally with the local game store — and the store owners typically thank their volunteers with free sodas and sometimes product discounts.

After doing your research, complete the company's volunteer application. Make sure you do a complete and thorough job; this application represents the first time that the company gets to meet you. A well-done application shows them your attention to detail and your interest in their program, as well as your ability to read and follow instructions (which counts for far more than you can imagine).

Most game companies respond in anywhere from one day to a couple of weeks, depending on the time of the year. If you send in an application during the summer convention season, don't expect anyone from the company to act on it for a couple of weeks because it's a really, *really* busy time.



Don't be surprised if the company asks you to take a formal test before joining its cadre of volunteers. In the last year or two, several companies instituted tests to ensure that its volunteers know their stuff. After you pass the test, you don't usually need to take it again, although you *will* need to take more tests in the future as expansion sets and new games hit the market.

Don't let all of the cool volunteer rewards out there make you lose sight of the *real* reason that you joined the volunteer program: to meet new people and help them get to know your favorite game. If volunteering stops being fun and starts feeling more like a job, take a break for a while. You can always come back to volunteering at some future point in time, but for now, take some time off. Try just *playing* the game for a while. Nothing reinvigorates the volunteer soul quite like actually sitting down and enjoying the game that you love so much. It helps you remember why you started this crazy elevator ride in the first place.

The wonderful world of volunteer rewards

Sure, being a product champion takes a lot of work, but it also yields a lot of rewards — both tangible and intangible. Although the work itself feels really good, so does the feeling of someone saying “good job” and handing you a box of booster packs.

Each company handles its volunteer rewards in a slightly different way. Some companies do it according to the number of tournaments you run and the attendance you get at each event and overall through the month. Others let you earn points toward purchasing things at the company's online store.

If you start helping at conventions, the reward machine ratchets up a notch. Convention volunteers often bring home the rarest and most special items, ranging from cool foil game cards to exclusive playing pieces. These ultra-special items often turn into the centerpieces of your special events back at the local game store, which in turn gets the local players excited about the game and encourages new players to jump onboard. (It's all part of the game company's evil plot to take over the world — but that's okay because you're on the winning side.)

Part V

The Part of Tens

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"My idea is to take Mona to a CCG convention for our honeymoon, but I don't think I have the Power, Speed or Defense to break it to her yet."

In this part . . .

Ah, the Part of Tens. What would a *For Dummies* book be without one? (Well, *unfinished* comes to mind first, which rapidly brings up *not yet paid*, so let's stop the train of thought right there.)

The chapters in this part cover the odds and ends of the information in the book. They give you some ideas for protecting your game cards and pieces while you buy, sell, and trade, and they offer suggestions of ways to keep yourself (or your kids) occupied during those many between-round breaks at major tournaments.

And make sure you point out the gift chapter to your friends, spouse, parents, or significant others. It's full of clever things that every trading card and collectible miniatures gamer needs but never gets enough of to last for the whole year. (And if you're on the giving side of the equation, you can always buy your friend a copy of this book!)

Chapter 20

Ten Tips for Buying, Selling, and Trading

In This Chapter

- ▶ Keeping track of all your stuff
- ▶ Taking time to learn
- ▶ Knowing what you have (and what you want)
- ▶ Condition, condition, condition!
- ▶ Trading with an eye for value
- ▶ When you find something cool, leave it alone
- ▶ Patience, grasshopper!
- ▶ Leaping into the bargains
- ▶ Repeat after me: “No”
- ▶ Send in the fodder!

Trading those game cards and miniature figures — the ones you’re willing to part with, at least — among your friends and fellow players makes collectible games all the more fun. Sure, you get a huge thrill when you pull a rare card or miniature from a booster pack, but the pride of ownership goes only so far. After all, somebody else probably wants that item a lot more than you do, and he might have something *you* really need in return. If you two can work out a trade, then all’s the better for you both!

Even if nobody in your area either wants to trade or has what you need, you can always turn to the online realm to buy and sell those elusive pieces. Heck, you can even trade online, although you need to proceed *very* slowly and carefully there. (Check out Chapter 18 for details about working with the online world.)

Whether you swap cards in your friendly local game store or sell your spare figures online, the tips in this chapter help you make the most of the transaction. Read them carefully and pay close attention to them as you trade. Most of them come from my own experiences — namely the many mistakes I made along the way. Live and learn from the error of my ways, without encountering the same problems yourself!

Keep Your Stuff Organized

When you start playing a trading card or collectible miniatures game, keeping track of your whole collection is easy. After all, you just started, so you don't own a lot of stuff. A few binder pages or a couple of small figure boxes pretty much accounts for everything in your world. You probably created a couple of decks or a few favorite armies, but you can easily track it all in your head.

In a short amount of time, though, your collection grows to the point that you start forgetting what you own and (more importantly) where you saw it last. Cards go into decks, which in turn go into deck boxes. Those missing cards leave empty spaces in your binders and boxes. Figures find their way into your traveling cases and then get left on the back seat after a tournament. And the new stuff you traded for during the last tournament never made it into your collection at all — it's in the trunk of the car!

The result of this madness: You lose track of what you own, what you want, and where the heck it all lives. To overcome this kind of crisis, apply some good, old-fashioned organization.

Start by gathering everything together in one place. Ferret out the lost and missing items by searching in card boxes, in car seats and trunks, under the bed, in the attic — anywhere your stuff might hide. Dig through your tournament bags and look in shoeboxes — you get the idea. After you get everything together, organize it by set. This makes the next step — inventory — a whole lot easier.



Although you can organize your gaming paraphernalia in any number of ways, I found that doing it by set gives you the greatest flexibility over time. When you start collecting a game, sorting by faction or card type works for a while, but it dissolves into chaos in a matter of months. Additionally, most tournaments for games like *Magic* restrict you to using the most recent set(s). At least *start* organizing by set — you can always switch to something else if it simply doesn't work for you.

Frankly, I hate inventorying my collectibles. It's time-consuming and requires a lot of detail-oriented effort — and neither of those things appeals to me. Still, I do it for one simple reason: I'm a space cadet and sometimes forget what I own. With one game that I actively played for a while, I traded for the same piece at least *three times*, but didn't realize it because my collection lived in several boxes. After I put all of my pieces together, I quickly realized what had happened. (Thank goodness that figure made good trading stock!)

To successfully inventory your collection, you need checklists (often called “spoiler lists” on the Web) detailing all of the cards or miniatures in each set. You can usually download these from the manufacturer's Web site or from various fan-based sites. With some games (notably the Wizards of the Coast *Star Wars Collectible Miniatures Game*), every booster contains a checklist.

With your list in hand, go through your collection and mark off each item you own. Leave space for multiples of the same item; your collection *will* include duplicates. Check your work carefully as you go because you want as few mistakes as possible. (You might find it useful to put everything in an Excel spreadsheet that you keep on your PC or PDA.)

After inventorying everything, store your games by set. What type of case you use is entirely up to you — I generally go with card boxes for card games and plastic tackle boxes for my miniatures. Sometimes I just grab a card box for the minis, too, because I can fit a bunch of card boxes into a single larger box for easy transport. You can always use a fancy card and figure case, too — they work great and protect your games very, very well.



Save yourself the hassle of dumping, re-sorting, and re-inventorying everything by keeping your checklists up-to-date. Updating your checklist takes only a minute, but an out-of-date list might cost you many hours of effort.

Start Slowly and Carefully

Why do parents tell children to keep their hand away from the hot stove? Because if they don't, the kids get burned.

Why start slow and easy when jumping into the world of trading your precious cards and figures? Because if you don't, you get burned.

Without a doubt, everybody who starts trading cards, figures, and other collectible pieces makes mistakes. It's normal and natural, and it's bound to happen to you, too. But if you start slow and easy, you reduce your number of mistakes by a huge degree.

Before trading anything, watch and listen to other people as they trade around you during tournaments or other events. How do they do it? What do they offer? How do they value their cards? Every group uses its own methods, so get to know how things work with your particular group before joining the fun.

After that, get to know the people who trade most often at your venue. Who can you trust? (It's a strange question, but you must ask it — not *everybody* has your best interests in mind.) Also take note of trading and negotiating styles that different people use. One person might come out with their best offer first, particularly for a piece they really want. Another person always offers low at first, in hopes of getting a really good deal (at your expense, I might add), but then warms up as the negotiations go on longer.

Why put all this effort into figuring out how your group works? Because you want to get the best and fairest deal you can. You don't want to take advantage of someone (it's unfair, plus word quickly gets around that people should beware when they trade with you), but you also don't want to give away something for nothing.



Find out whom you can ask advice from in the group, too. Look for someone who trades frequently and has a good reputation. If someone offers you a good-sounding trade but you feel unsure about it, ask your backup person with more knowledge to give his input on the deal. His expertise might save you from a bad situation or help you cement a solid swap.

Research What You Own and Want

Knowing is half the battle — at least that's what they used to say in the GI Joe cartoons. When trading game cards and pieces, this statement definitely holds true. You need to know every detail about the items you want to trade, buy, or sell. The more you know, the better the odds of making a good deal — and that's the goal.

What should you know about the items you want to buy, sell, and trade? Here's a good start:

- ✓ **Dollar values:** These vary wildly depending on the popularity of the game, your geographic location, and the current trends in deck- and team-building. Start by looking at completed auctions on eBay; that gives you a nice, simple barometer. From there, look to the pricing guides in *Scrye* and *InQuest Gamer* magazines. Pay the most attention to the mid-range pricing in both magazines because that's the ruler many people use.

- ✓ **Playability:** The more playable a particular card is, the more valuable it is to deck builders. Look at the deck lists on the Internet discussion boards and at your local tournament scene. Do particular cards show up quite a lot? As cards rise in popularity, they get harder to find because people begin hoarding them.
- ✓ **Rarity:** The name says it all on this one. The rare cards and pieces typically carry the highest values, although that's not always the case. Occasionally, uncommon cards command a strong price because of some unique twist to their gameplay.
- ✓ **Condition:** How much does the item's condition affect its value? More powerful cards command a higher price, period. The card's condition doesn't affect its playability, of course, only its collectibility.



Of course, not every card follows the rules of logic when it comes to pricing. A few years ago, one particular card from a licensed game sold (and traded) for far more than its value in the game simply because of the artwork on the card. Everybody loved the picture, so everybody wanted the card.



Keep your research current. Item values change by the week — and sometimes by the day! If you plan to do some serious trading over the weekend, for instance, invest some research time late in the week. Dive into eBay's completed auction listings and take notes about the latest prices. Compare them to the most recent price guides in *Scrye* and *InQuest Gamer*.

Check the Item's Condition

The better an item's condition, the more you can get for it — and the more you pay for it, too. But does that really matter to you? I've watched people make amazing offers in order to pick up one rare card in moderate condition. On the other hand, I often seen mint-condition cards trade hands at extremely low values. Condition makes up one of the factors in the value equation, and its importance depends entirely on you.

Do you want the most amazingly pristine card that anyone ever saw, or do you just want another copy of your favorite card for an amazing deck? Will you feel satisfied with a figure whose paint job leaves just a little to be desired, or do you want a showpiece that leaves your friends speechless? Whatever condition you want, decide early in your trading plans because that changes the landscape quite a lot.

When trading at your friendly local game store or during a local tournament, you get the luxury of seeing the card or game piece firsthand. You can touch

it, examine it in the light, and take a really good, long look at it. That lets you judge the condition of the item pretty closely. Trading and buying with first-hand knowledge puts you in the best position when it comes to item condition. Because you see it with your own eyes, you can easily make your own determination of the item's value.

Buying online is trickier because someone else acts as your surrogate eyes and hands. You rely on digital photographs and detailed descriptions to know what you're getting. In this case, the number and type of questions you ask depends almost entirely on the asking price (either in trade or in cold, hard cash) and your personal feelings about the importance of condition:

- ✔ **If you live and die by condition**, then ask all the pointed, detailed questions that you want. Make the owner describe every little defect. Ask for more photographs. Get all the information you can, especially if the seller wants a premium price based on the item's condition. As the buyer in this transaction, you have a right to know what you're getting.
- ✔ **If condition doesn't drive your every thought** (and you just want to own the card so you can *finally* create the masterpiece deck you always dreamed about), then don't pelt the owner with tons of requests. Just decide what it's worth (see the next section for more about that) and negotiate the trade.



If you disagree with someone about the condition of the item, tell the person. Explain your reasoning in detail, too. Don't just slam her with an unsupported statement like "that's not mint." That kind of thing only annoys the current owner, which in turn might drive up your price to pay for the owner's frustration with you.

Decide What It's Worth to You

Smart traders begin every trade or purchase with the same thought in mind: What's this item worth to me? After all, when the dust settles and the trading is complete, if you don't feel like you got a good value for your cards and figures, then you didn't make a good trade.

In a perfect world, in which all the cards come in mint unplayed condition and the eyes on every figure actually include pupils, what would make this trade worthwhile to you? Do you want a particular amount of money? Do you want certain cards? Do you really not care because some other factor outweighs the pure business aspects of the trade? Whatever you think about the value of the item, make sure that you think it through at least once (if not a few times) before finishing the transaction.

Determining the value of cards and miniatures depends on a lot of factors. The following items give you a good start at figuring out how much a particular item might fetch:

- ✓ **Play value:** How well does the card or figure work in the game? If something commands a lot of game-winning power, expect it to command a higher price in either cash or trade. This applies to both common and uncommon cards and figures. A particularly powerful or popular card with an uncommon rarity easily fetches more than a less-powerful rare card.
- ✓ **Rarity:** For normal cards, rarity affects the price because, by definition, rare cards aren't as common as, well, the common ones. The rarest cards — whether because of power, distribution, alternate image, or cool foil artwork — command prestigious prices. Condition matters a lot with these cards, so expect the price of a mint-condition version of an extremely rare card to climb pretty high.
- ✓ **Personal taste:** This one falls squarely in the category of “it depends.” Someone who loves a particular superhero or a certain faction of a miniatures game is probably willing to spend more on his favorite items than someone who just wants various pieces.
- ✓ **Current price on eBay:** As the world's interactive marketplace, eBay offers almost every collectible card and figure available. Look for trends in the values of closed auctions, such as several cards that sold within one or two dollars of each other.
- ✓ **Magazine price guides:** Both *Scrye* and *InQuest Gamer* publish monthly price guides that cover all the major trading card and collectible miniatures games on the market. Lots of people use the guides for informal trading, and many stores refer to them for baseline values. Don't expect to get the “high” value from the lists, though. Most traders look to the median or low values for their information.
- ✓ **Condition:** This one matters more to the people who want to complete their collections for the sheer joy of collecting rather than the person who loves playing the game and looking for different combinations. If you fall into the latter camp, you can sometimes get a deal because the people in the first camp pass by cards or figures that play perfectly well but look a little worse for wear. As a general rule, the better the condition, the higher the price.



Do I actually go through this whole list every time I trade something? Goodness no! But even when I trade a few commons or uncommons, I go through at least *part* of the list to make sure that I don't forget anything important (like the time I got so excited about a trade that I actually forgot to complete the trade before the person left the venue — oops).

Don't Impulsively Snag the First One You Find

Although the next tip, “Patient Negotiation Makes Better Deals,” covers some of the same ground, this tip really stands on its own — especially if you trade at the big summer game conventions. Don't jump on the first thing you see or the first trade somebody offers you. In a realm filled with lots of possible traders, you want to go slow and steady, taking your time and remembering that there are plenty of cards and figures available out there.

I made this mistake more than once — actually, more than a few times. I want a hot card or a certain figure, and someone casually offers it to me or I see it in a booth during a show. Rather than taking my time and thinking about the transaction, I impulsively acquire the item. Yippee — it's mine! Yes, but almost always at a higher price than if I had controlled my raging collector genes.

Every rule has an exception, and this one is no different. What if you want a really, *really* rare card or figure, you know *exactly* what it's worth to you, and somebody's willing to meet your price? Don't just stand there — trade with the person! You did your research, so you can make a good decision. I just don't want you to act *impulsively* and possibly get hurt in the process.



This goes double if you plan to purchase a bunch of boosters or play in any sealed-deck events soon. The packs always seem to know which cards you just traded for because you invariably pull them in your new packs. Open your packs and play in your tournament first, then add your new stuff to the collection and start trading. (Besides, you might pull exactly the item that your trading partner *really* wants, too!)

Patient Negotiation Makes Better Deals

There it is — the exact card you want! It's the one you spent hours thinking about and designing decks for; the one you read about in the magazines and watched other people play in the local tournaments. And now it's yours — well, *almost* yours, provided you can finish this trade.



Before getting yourself into too much of a tizzy, stop and take a deep breath. You need a level head before negotiating this trade! Calm yourself down. Even though you really, really want this card, remember that thousands of identical cards exist out there. The card sitting before you isn't the first or last of its kind. And you may or may not leave with it in your deck today.

Now that you recaptured your calm, approach your trade with quiet patience. If you bounce all over the place with total excitement, then your trading partner knows that she has something you *really* want, so she might try to get more for it. By trading in a quiet way, you express interest without showing your feelings (even though they might run rampant inside of you at that moment).

Next, find out what your trading partner wants in general and if she wants anything specific for the card you're interested in getting. If you have what the person wants and you think it's a fair deal, offer it. If you don't have what she wants but you can offer similar value, put together a fair package. Remind her that she could use the cards you offer as trading stock to get something else. You might need to sweeten the trade with an extra card to get her interested.



If you hit a rough spot negotiating for the card of your dreams, try offering a package deal. Look for something else the person has for trade and then add another item to your offer. Sometimes the combined value tips the negotiations in your favor — and you get the card you wanted *plus* something else for either your collection or your trading stock.

Finally, remember your ultimate bargaining tool: the word *no*. If you can't agree on a deal that you both feel is fair, politely decline and go on with something else. If your partner just wanted to see how far you would go, she'll probably jump right back into negotiating. If she wasn't serious about trading in the first place, she'll let the negotiation die. Either way, you know more about your partner's perceptions and whether or not you can complete the trade.



For more about the power of *no*, see “You Can Always Say No” a little later in this chapter.

When You Find a Bargain, Jump on It

Sometimes, the skies smile and somebody offers you an incredible bargain — one of those deal-of-a-lifetime moments. When one of those times happens in your world, think through the deal quickly and then, if it's *really* as good as it looks, pounce!



The key phrase in that last paragraph is “really as good as it looks” — and I want you to keep that up front in your mind every time you trade. Like it or not, some people in this world just don't play fair. They might claim that something's in better condition than it is, or even that a fake is actually the

real thing. When you trade or purchase pieces for your games, take an extra moment to double-check the item destined for your collection. Is it in the right condition? Is this really the one you want? Is it the actual item and not just a clever fake? An honest seller won't mind if you inspect the cards she offers. Protect yourself by giving the goods a close look.

When a good deal wanders by, consider picking it up for your collection or as trading stock. After all, even if it isn't precisely what you want or need for your collection, somebody else can probably use it for his or hers. Offering a good selection of cards for trade makes other people seek you out, which often gives you the better side of the deal.

Where can you find bargains like these? You often see them on eBay, particularly among auctions with a "Buy It Now" price, which lets you end the auction early by paying whatever fixed price the seller entered. In these cases, the seller either didn't know or didn't care about the current price, and just set a value that he wanted. To you, sitting on the other side of the screen, the price looks like a deal, so you click the button and finish the purchase. This happens most often during the first couple of weeks after a new set comes out, although you still find the same thing on older sets, too.



Above all else, fairness should guide your trading, especially when it comes to "bargain value" trades between an experienced player like you and a newbie. If the new player offers you a really valuable card for a mid-range one, point out what he's doing and make sure that's what he intended. Occasionally the other person just *really* wants your card, but most of the time the new player simply confused one card with another and thought *he* was getting a super deal. Little things like this build other people's trust in you as a fair trader, which makes trading easier (and usually more profitable) for you in the future.

Along the same line, very young kids sometimes play and collect these games, too. Although they can make their decks work, they might not really understand what's going on when it comes to trading. (After all, they're little!) If a younger player offers you an over-powered trade, kindly direct him toward a different trade that involves a less powerful card on his end of the deal. If the child stays adamant about trading his super-huge card for your wimpy one, include extra cards in the trade to make up the difference. If you still can't change the child's mind, put off the trade until his parents arrive, then enlist their help. Mom or Dad can sometimes fix the problem where you couldn't.

You Can Always Say No

“No.”

That’s a pretty strong word in the world of negotiating. But the word’s strength makes it your best tool during a trade — provided you use it carefully and appropriately.

No can mean a lot of things, depending on the person and the situation. For instance, *no* might actually mean

- ✓ I don’t feel like trading right now, but I might do it later.
- ✓ I don’t think the trade looks fair.
- ✓ I’m tired of talking.
- ✓ I’m focusing on something else.
- ✓ I’m done trading — don’t bother me.
- ✓ My ride’s here and I need to leave.

When someone says *no* to one of your trades, try to find out why. Sometimes the person just tells you outright, without waiting for you to ask. Other times, she just utters the sacred word and then stands there, silent as a rock, waiting for you to make the next move.



After getting a *no* during a trade, always respond with an open-ended question. For instance, try saying, “What card would you like instead of this?” The other person can’t answer that with another *no*, so he must share more information with you. After you find out what he wants, you can keep working on the trade.

Will you face times when *you* need to say *no* to someone else? Of course you will — it’s part of the tapestry of trading. When you say *no* to a potential trading partner, do it simply. Give the other person information — don’t leave him hanging. If you’re giving the trade to someone else, let this person know why. If you don’t think the offer looks fair, let him know. Don’t just pack up your cards and call it a night.



When trading cards and figures, your best asset — the thing that gets you the best deals and the most valuable goods — is your reputation. Develop a reputation as a fair trader. It pays off in the end, believe me.

Building Your Trading Assets

According to ancient wisdom, you can't be all things to all people. (And who'd really want to, anyway?) In collectible games, the saying goes a little differently, but with the same thought: No matter how large your collection, you won't own everything your trading partners want.

You can come pretty close, though, by carefully building your trading stock. This stock comes from booster packs you purchased for sealed events, large groups of cards you traded for as a package deal, or from a friend who simply decided to get out of the game. Whatever the source, your trading stock works like currency in the market, giving you the ability to get the things *you* want while pleasing the folks around you.

When picking up cards for trading stock, evaluate them the same way you look at the cards you add to your collection. Consider their value, usefulness in game play, condition, and rarity. All of those factors count equally, but one — condition — breaks the tie among the rest.

If everything else stands the same about a few cards, trade for the ones in the best condition. Top-quality cards give you plenty of flexibility when working with other traders. If the other person swoons over perfect-condition cards, you have just the thing in stock. If she doesn't care about the condition, you can still make a great trade — and possibly get something extra — simply because the card looks so good.



It never hurts to pick up a valuable rare card or two in dinged-up condition, particularly if you can get them on the inexpensive side. Not everybody lives and dies by card condition, but all the players want the cards that play the best. A strong card in medium condition still plays as well as one in mint perfection. Use your knowledge of the game to find the hidden (and slightly worse for wear) roses among the true thorns.

To build your trading fodder, watch for strong playing pieces whose value decreased temporarily for some odd reason. Perhaps *everybody* in the local group already pulled a copy of some card, so nobody really wants another one — at least not right now. Give the player something useful and then hold the new card for a visit to a different venue or to a summer convention.

You might also turn a single high-value figure into a number of medium-value ones. Individually, your figure outweighs the others, but the lower-value figures give you a lot more trading flexibility. After all, you can only swap your super-figure once, but you might get three or four trades out of the group you received for it.

Chapter 21

Ten Short Games to Play between Rounds

In This Chapter

- ▶ Take a trip to the Wild West
- ▶ Go play with the hurricanes
- ▶ Carefully collect or recklessly gather
- ▶ Match colors and score points
- ▶ Roll dice and win valuable prizes
- ▶ Buy, sell, trade, and make enough to quit the rat race
- ▶ Don't like the rules right now? You can change them on your turn
- ▶ Blast your opponent's space fleet to dust with a broken rubber band
- ▶ Add more points for yourself or reduce an opponent's score? That's a tough choice!
- ▶ Exercise your mind by thinking a little differently

Really big tournaments make collectible games fun. You get to test your skills against lots of people with a wide range of skill levels. You get to learn from the best players out there, put your best strategies to the test, and make new friends as you do it all.

Sure, really big tournaments feature all that and more, but most of all, they feature *waiting* — lots of waiting. You can feel like you spend half of your life waiting for the next round to start.

To keep the boredom at bay, pack a few of these fast-playing games in your tournament bag. You can teach these games pretty quickly (particularly because the people around you already know how to play card games), and the play itself takes only a few minutes. And, because these games take up very little space, you can always leave the game set up and then come back to it later if the round starts before your game ends.

Each of the following sections includes a game's basic stats (number of players, time to play, cost, and such), plus a quick overview of the play. Best of all, you can find all of these games at your friendly local game store!

Bang!: Western Fun, Complete with Meatballs

4 to 7 players, 30 minutes, \$9.95 (Mayfair Games)

Something about westerns — particularly those wonderful Italian “spaghetti westerns” like *Fistful of Dollars* — captures the imagination. Take the whole good guy/bad guy thing, add in some freewheeling gunplay, and toss with the ever-present lighted stick of dynamite (or bundle of dynamite, if the prop budget can afford it), and — *yee-haw!!!* — you’ve got yourself a couple hours of bandit-hunting, spur-jangling fun. Ah, it’s a magical combination.

Whatever catches your attention in these westerns, the *Bang!* card game, from Mayfair Games, captures it in cardstock form, right down to Italian card names with English “subtitles”. The game’s main goal is simple: Stay alive. Unfortunately, the game puts you in the middle of a gunfight, and bullets flying everywhere can really impede your life-oriented goals.

At the start of the game, each player gets a typical Wild West character like Vulture Sam, Rose Doolan, or Black Jack. Each character endows the player with a special ability of some kind during the game. The player also gets a typical Wild West job of Sheriff, Deputy, Outlaw, or Renegade. There’s only one Sheriff in town, and only one Renegade as well, but you can add in up to two Deputies and three Outlaws, depending on the size of the group. Everybody keeps his or her job private (face-down) except for the Sheriff (because everybody in town knows the Sheriff).

Your specific goal (apart from just staying alive) depends on your job:

- ✓ The Sheriff wants to kill all of the Outlaws.
- ✓ The Deputy wants to kill the Outlaws, plus help keep the Sheriff alive.
- ✓ The Outlaw wants to kill both the Sheriff and the Deputy.
- ✓ The Renegade wants to kill everybody, (Isn’t that just like a Renegade?) but he’s plotting secretly, ready to take either side.

Gameplay centers on playing cards from your hand. The game plants its tongue firmly in its cheek at this point, with hilarious results. To shoot another player, you play a **Bang!** card. To dodge the shot, the other player might use a **Barrel** (as in “He dove behind a . . .”) or just play **Missed**. To restore your health, you play a **Beer**. Knock out another player temporarily by locking him in **Jail**. Need more equipment? Visit the **General Store**. And, of course, a western card game wouldn’t be much of a tribute without the classic **Stick of Dynamite**.

The combination of characters, jobs, and player order around the table (because, like any gunfight, you can only shoot the people near you) gives *Bang!* great replay value. It’s a very different game every time you sit down to play, which promises fun for a long time to come.

Category 5: Beware the Sixth Card in a Row

2 to 10 players, 30 minutes, \$9.95 (Pando Games)

Traditional card games like *Bridge* and *Euchre* use simple constructs like going in a preset turn order (usually clockwise), taking a trick each turn, and using trumps. *Category 5* throws all of that out the window, leaving you with a wild fracas in which four or more tricks might fall in a single round, and you never quite know where you might fit into a round’s turn order.

Based on the popular German game *6 Nimmt* (meaning “six takes”), Pando reassembled the game for the American market by making some minor variations on the rules and wrapping the whole thing in a hurricane theme.

Category 5 (named for the most potent type of hurricane) consists of a deck containing 104 numbered cards. In addition to the number, each card includes one or more hurricane warning flags (in keeping with the deck’s hurricane theme), plus some hurricane name trivia to keep things interesting and make the game mildly educational.

Play starts by dealing a hand of 10 cards to each player. The dealer then turns up four more cards in the center of the table, starting four rows.

Each turn happens simultaneously. Players take one card from their hand and lay it face-down in front of them. When all players have a card ready, they flip the cards over at the same time. The player with the lowest numbered card goes first, with the rest of the players going in ascending numeric order.

Looking at the four “row” cards on the table, each player in turn tries to place his card next to the last card in a row that’s the closest number lower than his card. For example, if the rows start with 11, 17, 21, and 40, a 20 card would go next to the 17, because that’s the nearest lower number to the card. That row would now end in a 20 for the next player.

Several situations could happen at this point:

- ✔ If you played next to a number that’s lower than your card and your card *is not* the sixth one in the row, your part of the turn ends uneventfully. This is the best possible outcome (which means it’s the one that happens to me the least).
- ✔ If you played next to a number that’s lower than your card, but the row already held five other cards, then you put the five cards into your scoring pile and place your card in the row’s starting position. This means that you scored points, which you don’t want to do.
- ✔ If your card is lower than the final number in each row, then you must take a row of cards. Pick the row with the fewest hurricane flags on its cards and place those into your score pile. Put your card into the starting position for that row. (Whining helps at this point, too, but don’t overdo it.)

After ten rounds of play, count the number of hurricane flags in your score pile, write the number down on your score sheet, and deal a new hand. When someone hits 74 points (in honor of the wind speed which separates a hurricane from a tropical storm), the game ends. The player with the lowest point total wins.

Individual hands play in just a few minutes, so you could complete a whole game during the breaks for a single tournament. Plus, *Category 5* features the kind of cutthroat competitive style that trading card game players enjoy. Give it a try!

Coloretto: Collecting Colors and Thinking Fast

3 to 5 players, 30 minutes, \$11.95 (Rio Grande Games)

What can you say about a game with a chameleon on the cards? A lot, if the game happens to be *Coloretto*. This intriguing little title comes from Rio Grande Games and the folks at Amigo in Germany. It mixes strategy and luck to concoct a truly fascinating playing experience.

As you might guess from the chameleon artwork, gameplay in *Coloretto* focuses on colors. Over the course of the game, you collect cards with various colors, as well as wild cards and simple, plain +2 cards (which simply add two points to your score at the end of the game). You want to get a bunch of cards in just three colors, because every additional set of color cards after that counts negatively against your score. (Think *depth* instead of *breadth* when playing *Coloretto* to maximize your score.)

The game begins by starting one row of cards in the center of the table for each player. The first player flips the top card from the color deck and places that card into one of the rows. From that point on, each player gets a very simple choice: Draw a card and add it to a row, or take all of the cards in a row and add them to their score pile.

If the player adds a card to a row, nothing else happens in the turn, and the next player starts her action. Because each row holds a maximum of three cards, individual rows fill up pretty quickly. You must pay close attention to the colors each player has in his or her pile before tossing a card into a row. Otherwise, you might create a row with *only* the colors that another player wants for his collection!

After taking a row, the player adds the cards from that row into the color piles in front of her, and then sits out the rest of the turn. After all the rows get taken, players create new rows and the process begins anew. Play continues until someone pulls the end-of-round marker from the top of the draw deck, at which point everybody takes one of the current rows, and the game ends.

You never know what card might come off the deck next, so luck plays a solid part in this game. But *Coloretto* still features plenty of strategy, too. You need lots of cards to score the biggest points, but should you grab a row that contains fewer than three cards if it has *only* the right colors for your collection? Or should you go for big rows that pour scads of cards into your stacks in hopes of earning the biggest bonuses at the end of the game without racking up too many minuses? Time will tell in this great little card game!

Continuo: Great for Younger Kids and Non-Gaming Friends

1 to 8 players, 30 minutes, \$9.95 (US Game Systems)

Something about colors just brings out the creative juices in game designers. I don't know what inspired Maureen Hiron when she designed *Continuo*, but I'm really, really glad that it happened. *Continuo* (see Figure 21-1) takes a very simple premise — connecting chains of color together — and builds a very visual and highly replayable game out of it.



Figure 21-1:
Color my
world with
Continuo.

Illustrations from the *Continuo* Card Game reproduced by permission of U.S. Games Systems, Inc., Stamford, CT 06902 USA. Copyright © 1994 by U.S. Games Systems, Inc. Further reproduction prohibited.

Continuo contains 42 4" x 4" tiles, each printed with 16 boxes in two or three colors. You score points by connecting the colors on your tile to the colors in other tiles on the tabletop. The longer you play, the more the board changes. Every game comes out *very* differently thanks to the ever-changing board layout.

To start the game, players shuffle the tiles and stack them all face-down. Then, the starting player flips over two random tiles and places them side-by-side in the center of the table. The player then flips a third tile and starts playing the game.

You get one point for each color on your tile that connects with the same color on the other tile. If a tile contains three blue squares in a line, for instance, you might want to place the tile next to another tile with blue squares, lined up so the two sets of squares match and form a connected road or path. You then count the number of squares on that path and write down the results on your scorecard.

Optimally, you want to place a tile so it connects with *more* than just one color because you get points for every connection matching your tile. In some games, a single well-played tile can score over 30 points — and that’s no small task in this game.

Nothing beats the unique competitive/cooperative playing style that *Continuo* creates in a group. After a player draws a tile, everybody at the table goes into action looking for the tile’s best landing position. Even though your opponent ultimately gets the points for the play, *you* get the satisfaction of knowing that you discovered the best position.

Thanks to its small tiles, *Continuo* travels very well. The game requires no reading (and works on basic counting skills), so it’s a great pastime for parents and kids.



For a slightly different challenge, try the game’s other version, *Rhombus Continuo*. The basic play stays the same, but instead of squares, this game’s pieces use the elongated diamond shape known back in geometry class as a *rhombus*. It’s a small change, but the new shape puts a whole different spin on the game’s challenge.

Easy Come, Easy Go: Sharpening Your Dice Probability Skills

2 to 4 players, 15 minutes, \$14.95 (Out of the Box)

What’s this? A dice game from Reiner Knizia, the master of the pure strategy game — the man whose games *never* include dice? The idea shocked me at first, but that quickly gave way to laughter the first time I tried this game.

Easy Come, Easy Go starts with the same basic concept of dice games like *Yahtzee* and *Farkel*, and then turns the whole thing on its head. In this game, players compete against each other to win any three of the “fabulous prizes” in the center of the table. To win a prize, the player must roll that prize’s score on four dice. Some combinations don’t take much work (like 7 Exactly or 13 Exactly), while others require more luck and skill (such as Four Of A Kind or 17 Or Better).

On a turn, the player rolls all four of the custom-numbered dice with the beautiful leather-like dice cup (included with the game at no extra charge). If the dice form a combination that the player wants, she takes the appropriate prize card — even if the prize *currently* belongs to another player — and passes the dice to the next player.

More often than not, the player needs to work a little harder toward making some particular combination. The player “freezes” at least one of the dice and rerolls the rest. Each time the player rolls, she must freeze at least one more die in addition to the ones she froze before. If the dice fail to roll a combination that she doesn’t already have, then her turn ends and the dice go to the next player.

To win, you just hang onto any three prizes until the *beginning* of your next turn. And this sounds a lot easier than it is, believe me.

With its custom dice (numbered from zero to 5 instead of 1 to 6), hilarious game play, and delightfully kooky artwork, *Easy Come, Easy Go* earns its way into any gamer’s bag.

For Sale: A Real Estate Game with Attention Deficit Disorder

3 to 6 players, 15 minutes, \$14.95 (Uberplay)

I love *Monopoly*. Then again, I hate it, too. I enjoy the business aspects of the game (yes, I probably *do* need to get out more), but I’m too impatient to sit through a whole game. This leads to a lot of frustrating sessions of *we almost got through half the game that time*, which leaves both me and my friends irked and irritable.

Thanks to *For Sale*, a wonderful little game from Uberplay, my *Monopoly*-based friendships enjoy smooth sailing again. *For Sale* gives real estate game lovers their jolt of buying and selling properties. But unlike the multi-hour sessions in that *other* game, *For Sale* delivers the whole experience in 15 minutes flat — and that’s if one of the players really takes his time!

The goal in this game involves ending with the most money, both from house sales and from any unspent capital left over from the start of the game. *For Sale* plays in two rounds: property purchase and property sale. Both rounds use modified bidding systems, which give the game quite an interesting feel.

For Sale comes with a property deck (numbered from 1 to 30), a deck of checks (with values between “void” and \$15,000), and a bunch of money counters, all displayed in Figure 21-2.

Figure 21-2:
In For Sale,
you buy
properties
(on the left)
and then
sell them for
checks.



In Round 1, players bid on the right to pick one of this turn's available properties. At the start of each turn, the dealer draws one card for each player in the game and places the cards face-up in the middle of the table. Rather than bid on specific properties, the players bid for the right to take the property with the highest number. If you win the bid, you get the highest numbered property in the auction, plus you become the next dealer.

A lot of the game's fascination comes from the delightful contortions of the bidding system. In *For Sale*, only the player with the highest bid each turn spends the full amount of money. Everybody else either pays half of what they bid or gets a property for free. (Twisted, isn't it?)

To bid, you place one or more of your coins in front of you. The next player around the circle either bids more coins than you or passes by taking the lowest valued available property. If she overbids you, then play continues to the next person around the table. If she passes after bidding, then she gives half of her bid (rounded up, mind you) to the bank, pulls the remainder back into her stockpile, and takes the lowest valued card still up for grabs. After all other players drop out of the bidding, the last bidder puts his *entire* bid into the bank before taking the highest numbered card available that turn.

Round 1 continues until all of the properties get sold. After they're all gone, play shifts to Round 2, in which you sell the properties for as much money as you can.

Here, the bid mechanism turns secret. A player flips up one card for each player from the check deck. Now, players secretly select a card from their stack of properties and place it face-down in front of them. All players reveal their cards at the same time. The player with the highest property number takes the highest check in the set, and so on down to the person with the lowest-numbered property.

Sometimes you get a really good property with a small card simply because a bunch of valuable checks popped out that round. Other times (and I see this happen quite a lot), the checks for a particular round consist of a “void” (worth nothing), a couple of small dollar amounts, and a big juicy check. Obviously you want the big check, but how would you play it? Would you play big, hoping to score the big check? Do you get sly and play a middle-of-the-road card? What if your opponents anticipate that you'll go big, so they go really, *really* low, getting rid of their weak cards without worry or fear?

In order to win the game — by having the highest total value of checks at the end of the game — you are presented with many important decision to make! (And good luck making the best ones, too!)

Fluxx 3.0: Because Pre-written Rules Limit Your Options

2 to 6 players, 15 minutes, \$11.95 (Looney Labs)

Of all the things you can say about Fluxx, one comment *never* applies to this game: “I don't like the rules.” If you don't like the rules, then play it again! Every time you deal the deck, you get a completely new set of rules — in fact, changing the rules is the whole point of this game. (Well, that and laughing at the names on some of the cards, but I digress.)

This odd little card game from the folks at Looney Labs serves up something different every time you sit down to play. How do you win? Well, it depends on which **Goal** card went into play last. How many cards do you draw on a turn? Well, it depends on which Draw rule someone played. How many cards do you play on a turn? Even *that* depends on the cards.

Every game starts with the same basic rules: Draw a card and play a card on your turn, keep as many cards in your hand as you want, and (most importantly) when the game begins there's no way to win! The winning condition (or "goal") of the game is in the deck as well — and can change just like the rules do! On your turn, you might play a new rule that overrides any of the basic rules, helps you complete a goal, or that does something completely different, like forcing everybody to pass their cards to the left. You might play Keeper or Goal cards during your turn as well.

To win the game, you need the right **Keeper** cards in play (with names like **Chocolate**, **Love**, **Money**, and **Moon**) to fulfill the current **Goal** card. Each **Goal** specifies which **Keeper** cards trigger it. In fact, every card in the deck tells you exactly how to play it, making this one of the easiest games in the world to teach.

Light Speed: Flip, Place, Blast, and Repeat

2 to 4 players, 10 minutes, \$4.95 (Cheapass Games)

There's something about space games that sparks the imagination and draws you in. Unfortunately, most space games require hours of setup and playing time, plus a table the size of many third-world countries. *Light Speed* flies in the face of such traditions by offering gameplay that goes faster than some sneezes. The average game ends in under a minute. Of course, scoring the game takes another four or five minutes, but even that's a blast.

Each player in *Light Speed* gets a fleet of 10 ship cards, numbered 1 through 10. The number represents not just the ship's relative power, but also the order that the ships fire during the scoring phase. Smaller, faster ships fire before the bigger, more heavily armed ones, but they inflict less damage. Many medium-size ships get more than one shot or they feature shields to deflect enemy beams. And the biggest ships in the fleet look really, *really* mean — and they live up to that reputation.

Like many other titles from Cheapass Games, *Light Speed* uses a simultaneous play system. Each player gets a deck of 10 ships, which the player shuffles a few times. When all players look ready, someone counts down and says, "Go!" At that point, everybody starts flipping over ship cards and placing them onto the playing table as fast as possible. The game (or at least this portion of it) ends when the first person places her last ship and calls "Done."

With the ships arranged somewhat haphazardly on the table, players start the scoring phase of the game. Each player finds ship number one in their fleet (assuming it got put into the battle before someone else finished putting their ships out) and checks that ship's weapon for hits. Each card features a picture of the ship, plus one or more weapon beams pointing off the card. To check for a hit, the player takes a piece of string or a broken rubber band (which explains why my office has no usable rubber bands left) and stretches it along the path of the beam. If the line hits another ship, that counts as a hit. If it hits a ship's shields, then the shields prevent the damage. If it goes off into space, well, it misses.

Players mark hits on other ships with tokens of some kind or another and remove any destroyed ships from play. In the end, whoever scored the most kills takes the victory. The game also includes a couple of scenarios that keep things very interesting for future rounds.

If you enjoy space games, give this one a try. It's part of the Hip Pocket game series, which keeps both the prices and the physical size very small.

Loco: Fun, Fast Strategy That Sharpens Your Mind

2 to 4 players, 15 minutes, \$6.95 (Fantasy Flight Games)

Who would think that a deck of special cards and a bunch of plastic chips could offer so much fun and strategy? Regardless of how they did it, the folks at Fantasy Flight Games came up with a winner in *Loco*.

To win this quick and challenging little game, you need the most points. You get points by adding colored chips to your collection and by playing cards from your hand next to the appropriate chip stack. Each chip color has a corresponding set of six cards, numbered zero through five. A purple five, for example, goes next to the purple chip stack, making all of those chips worth five points each. And they hold that value until the end of the game — unless, of course, someone covers up the five card with something lower, like a two, one, or the ever-popular zero.

The big strategy in this game focuses on watching which chips your opponents take and then either getting some of those chips yourself or plotting to destroy the value of the chips before the game ends. But that brings up an interesting point by itself. None of the players know *exactly* when the game

might end. They know the end is coming, and they all know when it happens, but goodness only knows when the end might arrive.

When all six cards for one color come into play, the game immediately ends. No further plays, no last-moment strategizing — boom, the game ends. Because you always leave two or three cards out of play at the beginning of the game, you never know which color (or colors) *can't* end the game. That leaves everybody a little nervous when five cards stack up somewhere. After all, the game might end before you get another turn!

The game's delicious tension builds around the unknown timing of the game end, as Figure 21-3 shows. Do you spend what *might* be your final turn reducing your opponent's points or increasing your own? Which play gives you more benefit? What if your opponent can counter your play? And what if *that* ends the game?

Loco manages to be a fun, fast, and extremely taut strategy title. You can't beat the play value at the price, either!

Figure 21-3:
With four cards in one stack and five in another, this round of *Loco* might end on the next play. (The suspense is killing me!)



Set: An Erudite Pastime for the Thinking Player

1 to 6 players, 15 minutes, \$11.95 (Set Enterprises)

Most games work best for people who process information in one particular way. If you think about things linearly — first this, then that, then the other thing — you automatically have problems with a game that makes you think in a more flexible or fluid way. You probably feel frustrated when you play the game, but that’s just how it goes.

Set challenges that idea by adapting to the way that *you* think. You prefer a random approach? Fine. Want to do things in sequential order? Peachy. No matter how you think, you can win a game of *Set*.

At first blush, there’s nothing much to *Set*. The box includes a bunch of cards with one or more symbols on their faces. Look a little closer and you quickly notice that each card actually has four attributes:

- ✓ **The symbol:** diamond, oval, or squiggle
- ✓ **The number of symbols:** one, two, or three
- ✓ **The color of the symbols:** red, green, or purple
- ✓ **The shading of the symbols:** outline, shaded, or solid

Everybody plays at the same time in *Set*. No time is lost waiting for someone else’s turn. This keeps everybody constantly involved, making *Set* a great game to play with groups of up to six.

To start the game, someone places 12 cards face-up in the middle of the table where everybody can see them. All players immediately begin looking for a “set” of three cards that match a very simple rule: They are either the same in one or more attributes or different in the remaining attributes. It might be the same symbol, color, and number, but different shading. Maybe it’s the same shading and number, but different symbols and colors. Or you might even find my favorite type of set, in which *everything* is different between the three cards. (See Figure 21-4.)

When a player thinks he sees a set, he calls “Set!” to temporarily pause the game. He points out the three cards he thinks make up the set and explains why they follow the rules. If everybody agrees that it’s actually a set, the player adds those three cards to his scoring pile and then lays three new cards in their positions, starting the hunt over again. The winner is the person with the most cards in her score pile at the end of the game.

All Features are Different

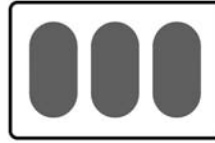
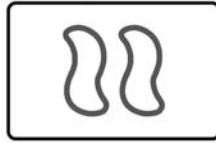
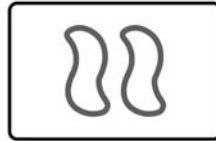
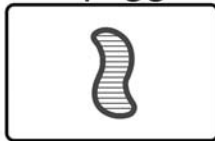


Figure 21-10: This layout includes a set of diamonds, a set of squiggles, and at least one set in the “all different” category.

All Diamond



All squiggles



If you get really bored, you can play *Set* by yourself, too. Just lay out the 12 cards and start looking for sets. For something a little different, try timing yourself to see how fast you can work the entire deck.

Chapter 22

Ten Great Gifts for the Game Player You Adore

In This Chapter

- ▶ Adding booster packs
- ▶ Picking up some card sleeves
- ▶ Sharing the joy of card binders
- ▶ Bagging things for tournament transport
- ▶ Boxing up everything at home
- ▶ Counting on counters
- ▶ Giving the gift of dice
- ▶ Setting up a magazine subscription
- ▶ Sending your gamer to a big convention
- ▶ Going for flexibility with gift certificates

“What can I get her? What does she need?” Ah, there it is — the questions that ring loudly from house after house during the holiday season each year. You know that your gamer plays [*insert name of trading card game here*], but you don’t know how to translate that information into something for under \$50 that you can wrap.

Game players enjoy getting presents as much as anybody, but their gift lists often look a little different than everybody else’s. Finding that perfect game-oriented *something* takes a little bit of extra effort, but it pays huge dividends. The gift ideas below apply to anybody that plays any sort of trading card or collectible miniatures game because, regardless of which game your gift recipient enjoys, all game players need certain things.

If you follow the tips in this chapter, the game player of your heart should light up like, well, your favorite light-oriented holiday decoration when she sees what you bought. And that's *definitely* a good goal.

Expanding the Collection with Booster Packs

From a gift-buying perspective, one *very* nice thing about collectible games is that players always need more cards and pieces. If you ever feel stuck about what to give, you can't go too awfully wrong by purchasing booster packs — or even a whole booster display, a package you can buy from your Friendly Local Game Store that includes *all* of the booster packs available for an expansion of your gamer's favorite game.



When purchasing boosters for someone, make sure you know precisely *what game* he plays and *which set* he wants. Every collectible game on the market includes multiple releases of cards or figures. Knowing that your friend plays *Vs.* or *Mage Knight* gives you about half the information that you actually need to make a purchase. From there, find out which *specific sets* he wants. Buying the wrong release of the right game takes a lot of the luster off an otherwise thoughtful gift.

As a general rule, all players can use more of the newest cards or pieces. Ask your friendly local game store to guide you toward the newest stuff for whatever game your player loves and then pick out some packs.

Newer players might want a starter and some packs, or perhaps a handful of packs from the last few sets. A new player's collection always needs more of everything, so you can't really go wrong.

More-experienced players generally want the latest stuff. Their binders contain lots of the previous releases, so stick with whatever's new and popular. Holiday products that contain special limited-edition cards make great gifts for these folks.



If you decide to give a display (or a case of collectible miniatures boosters), ask your game store about their quantity discounts. Almost every store knocks off some money for buying boosters by the display or by the case. If your recipient wants an older set of cards or figures, you might get even *more* money off because the store wants to cut down its backstock.

Adding More (And Cooler) Card Sleeves

When trading card games first arrived on the scene, players didn't view their decks as anything really special. They rubber-banded decks together, shuffled them during games, and generally treated them like, well, cards. As the resale market for cards grew, players quickly realized that their cards had actual monetary value in addition to playing value.

This left players in a conundrum. The most valuable cards from a monetary perspective were also the most powerful cards, which they really wanted to put into their decks. But to protect the monetary value of the card, they couldn't really play with it. Talk about a problem!

That's why deck protectors (also known as *card sleeves*) came into the world. These little plastic slipcases fit over the cards in your deck. In addition to making your deck look really spiffy, they protect your cards from spills, bends, rips, tears, and the ugly scuffing that comes from regular use. Suddenly, players could use *any* card in their collections without fear that every shuffle costs them a little bit of money.

Players almost always need more deck protectors. Before picking up some as a gift, find out what brand of protectors your player prefers, and whether she needs normal-size protectors or the slightly narrower "mini" size. *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players, for instance, need the mini protectors, but *Pokémon* players use full-size protectors.



In their continuing effort to add more "coolness" to collectible games, several deck protector companies have released special artist-edition protectors. Instead of sporting a plain color or shiny chromatic backing, these protectors feature gorgeous fantasy or gothic horror artwork in rich color. They cost a little more, but they look beautiful on the table.

If your player owns some *very* special cards that rarely get played anymore, consider getting some nice screw-down card display cases with matching stands. These solid plastic cases protect the cards while putting them out for show. (And believe me, game collectors love few things more than showing off their rarest and most amazing cards to other collectors.)

Organizing the World with Pages and Binders

The longer someone plays trading card games, the more cards they end up owning. It's just a natural part of life. Of course, owning the cards means storing the cards somehow. You can't throw them *all* into boxes, because building great decks requires studying the cards and learning how they interact. Yet you don't want to keep the cards loose, either, because they might get damaged or lost.

Card binders and 9-card pages (for use with regular three-ring binders) solve this dilemma. They let you see the cards quickly and easily while still protecting them from all manner of nastiness. You can also throw a binder or two into your backpack and take the whole thing to a tournament for easy trading.

One-piece binders (also known as *portfolios*) do a great job for trading stock or storing the current set that's under study. The binder wraps a heavy cover around a bunch of built-in card storage pages. The cover often matches one of the company's deck protector designs, so if your favorite game player also enjoys fashion (hey, don't laugh — it can happen), you can put together a complete ensemble of coordinated storage products.

These all-in-one binders typically come in two sizes based on the number of cards they hold on each page. The small four-card size includes 14 pages, capable of holding about 112 cards (figuring two cards in each pocket). The larger nine-card size contains 10 pages, with a total capacity of about 180 cards.

Because they're one-piece — with the pages molded directly into the cover — when these binders start wearing out, you can't do much beyond adding some tape here or there. At some point, you just throw out the old one and pick up a replacement.

If the thought of perpetually re-purchasing a binder bothers you, turn your attention to the standard nine-card pages that fit into any three-ring binder. This makes a very flexible storage system. You can add or remove pages at will, reshuffling things, and simply buy a bigger binder if you need more room. On the flip side, if your three-ring binder ever opens unexpectedly, then your pages remove and reshuffle themselves, which rarely adds joy to your day.

To prevent that kind of problem, many people use either zippered binders or higher-quality locking three-ring binders instead of the cheap, normal versions. Any office supply store has locking binders (which use a level to lock

the rings shut, preventing your stuff from escaping). Check the student supplies aisle for zippered binders. Some of the game companies also make nice zippered binders, both in three-ring and portfolio versions.



Instead of getting regular round-ring binders, look for the new-style D-ring binders. As the name suggests, the rings in these binders look like a reversed letter *D*, with a flat side toward the pages, instead of a completely round ring. This one small change adds a surprising 25 to 40 percent more storage capacity to each binder. Frankly, I didn't believe that the ring shape could make *that* much difference when I first saw D-ring binders, so I bought one to give it a try. Wow — what a difference! I eventually replaced all of my round-ring binders with D-ring versions and recovered almost a foot of shelf space in the process. D-ring binders cost a little more, but they're definitely worth the money.

Traveling with a Tournament Bag

As players get further into their games, moving the various game components — cards, figures, dice, markers, trading lists, rule books, magazines, and such — from one place to another goes from simple to massively complex. In the beginning, you grab a deck box and some counters and then hit the door. Later, you logistically plan the trip, deciding which deck boxes to take (because you don't know what the competition might use), which binders to throw in the car (you don't want to miss any trading), and how many dice and counters you might need for any of the various games you plan to play.

It doesn't take long before players start stuffing things into any handy bag, regardless of the bag's original purpose. If the bag includes a handle and some storage space, then it works — at least for a while. But then things start escaping from the bag or getting left behind at tournaments. Suddenly, the player wants — no, *needs* — a real solution to the gear transportation problem.

Serious game players require serious gaming luggage, so a game bag makes a great gift opportunity. Dedicated gaming carriers come in all shapes, sizes, and price points. Visit your friendly local game store for the best selection of gaming gear. Remember that most stores happily special-order products if your game player wants something specific.

Start with a look at one of the dedicated card bags from gaming companies like BCW (www.bcwsupplies.com) and UltraPro (www.ultrapro.com). These cases include soft foam inserts that fit either loose stacks of cards or standard-sized card boxes, plus space for dice, markers, rule books, and the other necessities of the gaming life. The cases usually cost around \$25.



UltraPro also makes a gaming case specifically designed for collectible miniatures games. Instead of the larger spaces for deck boxes, these cases include a multitude of smaller padded compartments designed to organize and protect all of those miniatures. Of course, the cases include space for sundry add-on goodies like dice and markers, too.

Also consider a zippered deck box album. This padded (and reinforced) three-ring binder offers pockets for a pair of standard deck boxes, several pouches for dice and markers, plus room for plenty of nine-card pages. It keeps the player's active decks and supplies handy while hauling the trading stock at the same time.



You can also mix a game case with a standard backpack for a simple but effective carrying case solution. Make sure that the game case fits into the backpack — otherwise, your player needs to track *two* bags instead of one, which leads straight back to the problem that started this whole gift-purchasing journey. Depending on what you find, though, this might save you some money without impacting the bag's usefulness.

If your gamer hauls more stuff than the bags or binders can hold, consider a gaming backpack from UltraPro, a special rolling bag from BCW, or one of the behemoth packs from Charon Productions (www.charonproductions.com). Any of these can increase your player's carrying capacity by a large factor. The backpack includes space for deck boxes, a large three-ring binder, all sorts of accessories, and even a CD player for quick relaxation between rounds.

At first glance, you might mistake BCW's rolling bag, affectionately called *Mr. Suitcase*, for a regular roll-along travel bag. After all, it's FAA-approved as carry-on luggage for flights, and it comes in standard black, preferred by travelers everywhere. But this travel bag fits more than clothes! It comes with four standard game cases, each of which holds 600 cards (or fewer cards plus some accessories). That gives Mr. Suitcase a starting capacity of 2,400 cards, with a maximum of 3,600 if you add another pair of game cases!

For a truly elegant (and spacious) solution to toting miniatures around, take a look at the Charon Scoutpack, Skirmishpack, and Battlepack. Thanks to mix-and-match foam inserts, these gorgeous bags give your player tons of flexibility. The exact capacity depends on what kind of foam inserts you use in each bag, but the bag's raw space guarantees room for anywhere from 50 miniatures in the Scoutpack to hundreds in the gigantic Battlepack. For those miniatures players who have a really huge collection to tote around, check out Sabol Designs for their luggage-like figure cases that come in sizes from reasonable to massive! (<http://saboldesigns.net/index.php>)



If you shop Charon's online catalog, remember that the site shows pricing in *Canadian dollars*, not United States dollars. That translates into a nice discount off the stated price — usually about 20 to 30 percent, depending on the current exchange rate.

Building Storage Space with Boxes of All Kinds

Boxes, boxes, boxes! At some point, every collectible game player's collection grows so large that it needs *lots* of storage space. The cards overflow their binders and the miniatures run amok from their cases. These folks need help getting their world back under control! You can offer a hand by giving storage boxes to your favorite gamer.



Suggesting that your game lover simply throw out some things probably won't help. You can always try, but don't expect a joyous response to the suggestion. I could list a lot of possible excuses — er, *reasons* — why your gamer shouldn't get rid of some redundant cards, but you'll hear them soon enough without my help.

For a first pass at organizing your friend's mess, try using standard white card boxes. They come in all sizes, and they do a great job with both trading card games and collectible miniatures games. Granted, the miniatures rattle around some in the boxes, but that won't matter much for garage or closet storage. Thanks to their low cost, you can throw quite a few card boxes at any storage problem without breaking your budget.



If you want an inexpensive storage solution for collectible miniatures games, look no further than the fishing tackle department of a nearby department store. Plastic fishing lure boxes make *great* storage units for miniatures of all genres. Because the boxes typically include movable dividers, the gamer can custom-build (and infinitely rebuild) the box to meet her changing needs. Take a peek in the storage sections of the local hardware store as well because they usually have some larger, tougher boxes there. One of my favorite miniatures cases came from a hardware store. It's roomy, with large box-shaped dividers. It works like a dream!

Still, some gamers prefer *real* miniatures cases to the less-glamorous get-the-job-done cases. In this case (pardon the play on words), point your attention to specialty cases like the Mage Cage from Active Minds (www.activemindsolutions.com) and the Vessel case from Rook (www.myrook.com). These companies look at the unique needs of collectible miniatures games and create products that do a darned good job of moving playing pieces without damaging anything.



If your friend needs to store and move a huge army with hundreds of pieces, flip back to the gaming bag section and consider picking up a Battlepack case from Charon Productions or an ARMY TRANSPORT Battalion from Sabot Designs.

Those cases hold a *lot* of stuff — way more than most people demand, but just right for the dedicated game player.

Counting Life, Actions, or Whatever with Tokens and Markers

Who says trading card games aren't educational? Almost every game out there includes some kind of counting mechanic for monitoring life, hit points, or some other game attribute. Keeping track with that mechanic demands yet another gaming accessory: tokens and markers.

Most players start with either glass beads or simple, plastic counting chips for their tokens. Either option keeps the cost low while doing the job right.

Other players use their game tokens as a form of personal expression by looking for the most unusual options out there. Among the players I know, you might see markers that include playing pieces from a *Risk* game, little Lego people, skull-shaped beads, miniature dice, pennies, and even high-end clay poker chips. Markers like these make for quite the colorful battlefield!

If you plan to purchase something unique, work with your gamer on some options. This gift makes a great cooperative effort that involves shopping through craft stores and bead shops, looking for *exactly* the right thing. You can also go for upscale markers from specialty companies like Hammerdog Games (www.hammerdog.com). Many items in their *Imajewels* line of markers include licensed, game-specific graphics that really set a player's heart a-flutter.



Oversized dice make great life counters, too — plus they look cool on the player's desk between games. Check with the local game store to see what's available. You might even find one that matches your player's favorite dice color scheme!

Rolling Along with New Dice

To a true game lover, dice take on an almost mystical status. Players spend a lot of time with their dice, and they often believe that certain dice roll best under certain conditions. Whether the dice actually work that way or not (most of the time they don't, but please keep that as our little secret) doesn't really matter — what matters is that peculiar bond between a gamer and his dice.

Even with that bond, every single game lover on the planet *always* needs more dice. It's a moral imperative. Big dice, little dice, dice in special colors — game players love them all.

Most collectible games (assuming they use dice in the first place) rely on standard 6-sided or 20-sided dice. In addition to different shapes, dice come in all kinds of color schemes. That's one reason players love dice so much — you can collect them! Color-wise, basic dice are simple, solid opaque and translucent colors like red, yellow, green, and clear, but those are only the tip of the iceberg.

Things really start getting interesting when you get into the specialty dice available from companies like Chessex (www.chessex.com), Crystal Caste (www.crystalcaste.com), and Koplw Games (www.koplwgames.com). These companies mix colors like ancient alchemists mixed chemicals, and they come up with some amazingly beautiful dice in the process. They occasionally do limited-edition runs of the most exotic color combinations and materials, making these dice extra-special.



You can find dice at almost any game store out there. If your player prefers one particular game store, start your shopping excursion there. The staff probably knows your player, and can point out the specific type of dice she might like. Ask if the store has a dice sampler, which displays the various color combinations available from their suppliers.

Subscribing to a Favorite Game Magazine

Players love reading about their favorite games and learning strategies to help them squash their opponents during the next tournament. Because of that love, the trading card game hobby spawned a pair of monthly magazines that focus almost exclusively on collectible and trading card games.

Both *InQuest Gamer* and *Scrye* feature reviews, strategy articles, and tournament reports. *InQuest Gamer* approaches gaming with a lighter touch, often poking fun at itself and the game hobby with a combination of deep devotion and sometimes taste-challenged humor that appeals to teenaged boys. *Scrye* aims for a reader who wants solid information and strategies without a goofy soundtrack. Both magazines include reviews of non-collectible games, as well as occasional coverage of new computer games (particularly if they tie in to a collectible game of some kind).



From time to time, the magazines feature special mail-in promotions. By sending in a form from the magazine (along with a check or money order in your favorite local currency), you get some special limited-edition figure or card. These pieces make a subscription well worth the price because you can usually buy several of the pieces and then trade them to your friends.

Check with your local game store or bookstore for subscription information. Many game stores can set up a subscription plan through the store, which saves some money over buying individual copies.

Giving a Big Convention Trip

The Holy Grail of gaming is playing (and winning!) your favorite game at one of the big summer conventions. These multi-day events bring together competitors from all over the world, making for one of the most fun and challenging playing environments you can find. Add to that the sheer excitement of assembling thousands of game players in one place, and you get the recipe for an unforgettable game-playing experience.



Before getting *too* awfully excited, the odds of attending a big summer convention depend greatly on where you live. The two biggest conventions take place in Indiana and Ohio, with other major events happening in Georgia, Illinois, and southern California. If you live close to one of these areas, then you're in luck. If you don't, then you're in for a bit of a drive.

The two biggest events in North America happen just three hours (and about seven weeks) apart from each other. The Origins International Game Expo (www.originsgames.com) takes place in late June (and sometimes early July) each year, and draws about 15,000 people annually to Columbus, Ohio. The largest game convention in North America, GenCon (www.gencon.com), rolls into Indianapolis, Indiana, during mid-August, just before school starts. It boasts an audience in the 25,000-person range. Both conventions offer a variety of national and international tournaments, with plenty of events for all of the big games.

If you want a Southern flair to your game (and plenty of science fiction and fantasy literature as well), make a Labor Day visit to Dragon*Con (www.dragoncon.org) in Atlanta, Georgia. Although the convention focuses on books, movies, and art, Dragon*Con's gaming tracks keep growing every year. It's well worth the visit.

Finally, west-coast game players can enjoy the relatively new GenCon SoCal convention in Anaheim, California, in mid-November. Like its big brother in Indianapolis, GenCon SoCal focuses on gaming, but adds plenty of other events to keep things fun. Although the convention started only a few years ago, it attracts quite a crowd.

Gift possibilities abound with conventions. The simplest and most basic gift, a convention admission badge, costs between \$45 and \$80, depending on the convention and the time of year that you purchase it (badges cost a lot less early in the season). You might also toss in some money toward tickets for specific events at the convention. Money to spend on the exhibit floor makes a nice addition, too.

Visit the convention Web sites for more details about each show, including registration times and badge prices. Also look at the Web sites for your player's favorite games to see if the game manufacturer plans any super-special events for one convention or another.

Giving a Gift Certificate Means Never Saying "You Don't Play That Game Anymore?"

Some people see gift certificates as a wimp-out gift, but I disagree. Giving a gift certificate lets the recipient personalize your gift in a way that you can't do yourself, regardless of the amount of work and effort you put into the process. It's the ultimate "I appreciate you" statement. The sentiment behind that beautiful envelope and the gilded certificate inside is "I love you enough to *not* make you stand in the after-holiday return lines to convert the sweater that I was going to get you into cold, hard cash. That, more than anything, my dear, displays the depth of my feelings for you."

That's my kind of gift. (Besides, I really *hate* standing in those return lines.)

Before giving that certificate, do some research. First, you need to know where your game player shops and plays. Does he buy product or play in tournaments at a friendly local game store? If so, purchase your gift certificate there. That lets your game player buy his product in familiar surroundings. Plus, it helps ensure that those local tournaments keep going.

After deciding on the location, you need to come up with a dollar amount. You know your target dollar amount the best, so definitely stay inside your comfort zone. At the same time, keep in mind what things actually cost, so you give your recipient enough to pick out something cool.

The following list gives you an idea of what players need and how much it all sets you back:

- ✔ **Card booster packs:** Most booster packs cost between \$3 and \$5 each, depending on the game. Sealed packs from older sets or from the first edition of a particular release might go for significantly more money.
- ✔ **Booster packs for collectible miniatures games:** Because manufacturing and painting those little pieces of plastic takes more effort than printing and slicing a bunch of cards, boosters for miniatures games usually command a higher price than card packs. You can expect to pay between \$8 and \$13 for most collectible miniatures boosters, with some sets going to as much as \$20 (these usually include special extra-large pieces which drive up the price).
- ✔ **Deck protectors:** Deck protectors (those plastic sleeves that players slide their cards into) cost between \$4 and \$5 for a package of 50. Most games use between 50 and 100 cards, so plan on at least two packages of sleeves. Deck protectors take such an important place in a game player's world that they get their own dedicated gift section, called "Adding More (And Cooler) Card Sleeves," a little earlier in this chapter.
- ✔ **Card boxes:** Here, the price depends on whether you stay simple with a plain cardboard box (\$1 or less, depending on the capacity) or go for something nicer. Plastic deck boxes vary between \$2 for a small box and \$5 for a larger one. Metal deck boxes start around \$3.50 and top off in the near-\$10 range.



Although cash might seem like a simpler alternative to a gift certificate, I recommend getting a gift certificate anyway. Despite its ultimate flexibility, cash doesn't communicate the proper gift attitude, particularly to your game player. A certificate to your gamer's favorite store shows that you paid attention to her hobby and that you really wanted to give her something special. Sure, it takes a little bit more effort, but the extra work you put into a gift certificate makes it a much more meaningful gift.

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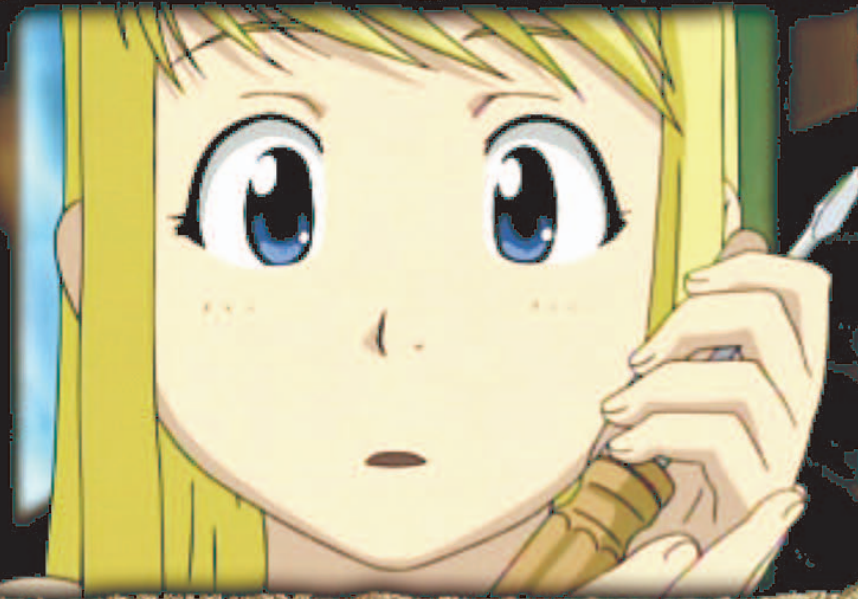
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4

Winry Rockbell
Mechanic



4

Human

Battle Wits: Target character with an attachment gets +2 to each attribute.

4

Ever since the death of her parents during the Ishbal uprising, Winry has thrown herself into her work.



0

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FMA 63 / 240 C

Winry Rockbell
from Fullmetal Alchemist

Goblin Brigand

1 2



Creature — Goblin Warrior



Goblin Brigand attacks each turn if able.

Like a loaded cannon—point and shoot.

— Arnie Swekel

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2/2

Goblin Brigand
from *Magic: The Gathering*

4

CAROL DANVERS ♦ WARBIRD™



GALACTIC ADVENTURER

AVENGERS



ILLUSTRATION BY ALEX GARNER



Reservist (You may recruit this card from your resource row. If you do, you may put a card from your hand face down into your resource row.)

While Carol Danvers is team attacking, whenever she stuns a defender with cost 5 or less, return that defender to its owner's hand.

7
6

MAV-005

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Warbird
from Vs. System

Onix

80 HP



BASIC

風、岩、毒タイプ



Horn Rush

10

Flip a coin. If tails, this attack does nothing.



Granite Head

20

During your opponent's next turn, any damage done to Onix by attacks is reduced by 10 (after applying Weakness and Resistance).

weakness



resistance

retreat cost



SRIC HZ 726

©2004 Pokémon, Nintendo

04/100



Onix
from *Pokémon*

0

Ashigaru Archers

0



1

2

-

You may draw an additional Fate card in your next End Phase after bringing Ashigaru Archers into play from your hand.

Battle: Bow Ashigaru Archers for a Ranged 2 Attack.

*"No goblin has crossed the Kaiu Wall in five years!"
Hisayuki roared. "This will not change today!"*

1

鑽

CoB ILLUS. JOHN CADICE™ & © 2005 AEG

Ashigaru Archers

from the Legend of the Five Rings

COMMAND KNIGHT



1st Edition

SDS-EN008

[WARRIOR/EFFECT]

While at least 1 other monster exists on your side of the field, your opponent cannot select this card as an attack target. Also, while this card remains face-up on the field, increase the ATK of all your Warrior-Type monsters by 400 points.

ATK/1200 DEF/1900

10375182

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Command Knight

from Yu-Gi-Oh!



Shield

from Warlord: Saga of the Storm

10

• Cthulhu

Dead but Dreaming



10

Illus. Matt Dixon

R 91

Ancient One.

Villainous. Invulnerability.

Lower the cost for you to play Cthulhu by 5 if you control 4 or more **Cultist** characters.

Response: after Cthulhu enters play, each player discards his hand.

Character



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Dead but Dreaming
from Call of Cthulhu