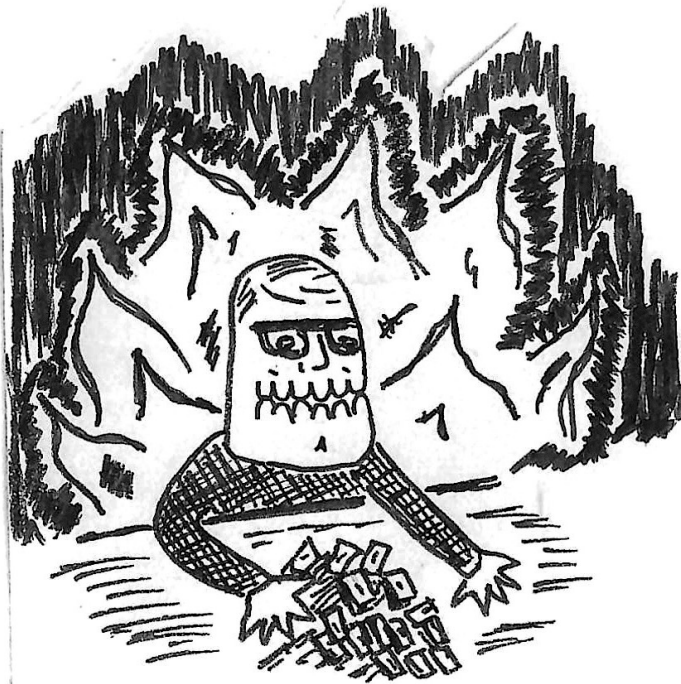


Upkeep

Spring 2025



Three bits of media that have been on repeat in my mind lately:

A sequence of *Cat and Girl* comics from January, 2009 in which the beatnik vampire and Cat are respectively asked by Girl “how do you stay warm in the cold shadow of death?” The beatnik vampire appears unhappy—with himself?—to admit that “I collect records.” Cat looks around and then says “fireworks” while Girl smiles.

The lyrics of John K. Samson’s 2020 single, “Fantasy Baseball at the End of the World” and “The Earth is on Fire” by Sinaloa from their 2006 split with Ampere. The titles do a good job of communicating what they are about. That said, I will note it is somewhat surprising, and yet very reassuring, to hear the oft soft spoken/sung Samson express a desire for the death of politicians.

Anyway, this is a publication about a different fantasy game. Or, maybe, it’s about fantasies and escapism? Maybe it’s about trying to stay warm in the cold shadow of death and collapse of society? Maybe it’s about the hope expressed in Samson’s last verse. Putting in love; putting in faith; going outside; going to help organize something better; something beautiful. We are fortunate this issue to publish a good piece about organizing and the fantasy card game that brings us all together.

I am not sure where I am going with this and my prior introduction’s hope that “a more coherent philosophy will coalesce with time” seems all the more foolish. Whatever. We got a second issue out at least. Right?

May we all be so fortunate and driven to be working towards something better, something beautiful.

Thank you for reading.

IN RESPONSE. . .

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

September 30, 2024

Upkeep Editorial Board
9621 Brunett Ave.
Silver Spring, MD 20901

Dear Mr. Editor:

I write to address a grave error in the inaugural issue of UPKEEP. In his essay 'Capitol Cube Championship, Kind Of?', writer Alex Houstoun confidently states that the 2024 Capitol Cube Championship was held 'in a hotel ... in Alexandria, VA'. Nothing could be further from the truth. Capitol Cube Championship 2024 was held in a hotel in Crystal City, a neighborhood of Arlington, VA. While the casual observer might confuse these two localities--both start with an A, both are in Virginia, both were once part of Washington, DC... as a reader (an extremely loyal one, at that, having read your *every* issue) of UPKEEP, I should hope you hold your writers to a higher standard.

I am proud to call Arlington home, and it was an honor and a pleasure to host cubers from all over our country here last month for the inaugural Capitol Cube Championship. I cannot express how much it pains me to have my home mistaken by UPKEEP for that of our southerly neighbor. I humbly request that a correction be issued.

Yours in cube,



Lincoln Davidson
Organizer,
Capitol Cube Championship

Mr. Davidson—We are listening. We are learning. Our apologies to the great community of McLean, Virginia.

—Ed.

CUBE, RADICAL PLAY, AND ORGANIZING

by gabor

I came back to Magic after a long break (10+ years) in 2023. As I refamiliarized myself with the rules and taught the game to my partner, I thought a lot about how rare it is to fall back in love with a hobby that meant so much to me at such a formative time in my life, my teens. At that time, games were an important way for me to connect to classmates after transferring schools. Games brought refuge as many things in my personal/home life felt unknowable or difficult to understand.

While I still use games as a way to connect to people, there are many other containers for community that I've discovered and become comfortable with in the intervening years. Most critically has been finding community around political organizing and activism. These two worlds are also connected. I've played games with almost everyone I've worked closely with in organizing to foster connections and grow closer to people, and I've organized with people I play games with to support local tabletop workers unionizing and raise money for Palestinian families escaping genocide.

This piece is about cube, but it's really about politics, and when I say politics I don't mean political theater—electoral colleges and a two party system. I'm talking about the politics of community and organizing.

To **play** with people is political in a world defined and governed by productivity and capitalism. To organize people into spaces to grieve, to laugh, or to face the reality that community is how we have always survived our greatest hardships **is political**.

Cas Holman's *Radical Play* "considers play as an act of rebellion." She elaborates that play is pitted against "productivity" and "adulthood":

Productivity: Do things that have universally understood value. Contribute as a worker.

Adulthood: Do things that are serious and practical. Practice restraint, control yourself.¹

Holman's professional work has focused on play with toys, but her work is still applicable to games like Magic. Time spent playing games or with toys is not traditionally seen as productive or adult, but we undeniably derive a lot of value from it. Holman writes, "In our cultural systems we learn to not play. School trains us to hold still, ignore playful instincts that might call us to joke with a friend or notice the birds outside." Magic and other games that bring people together teach important lessons about how we relate to one another, how to lose and win gracefully, how nobody is perfect, and more. These games create integral opportunities for peer-to-peer learning that can feel more enjoyable, engaging, and safe compared to formal classroom settings structured by strict hierarchy. At their best, games teach us important lessons in a context that pushes against capitalist notions of productivity.

Organizing Means Commitment. (If you haven't read this piece by Grace Lee Boggs then I encourage you to read it.²) I'm not arguing that a cube group is a revolutionary cadre—the primary topic Boggs discusses in this essay—but I do believe that organizing, including assembling a group of friends to play, is committing yourself to them. To ask for their trust in your community. To promise them that they matter to you. To welcome them into a space that is important to you.

Including people you are committed to in these spaces is important. Drawing boundaries around who you will include is important. Not everyone who plays this game is someone you want to be committed to.

Often, these spaces expand and change. They grow from four people to six to eight. They change from the same people to a rotating cast. They grow into events; sometimes these events raise money for important causes. All of these changes are political. Who are those two new people who showed up and why are we committed to

them? What cause are we raising money for and why? Where are we going to host this event and are there good reasons for doing so (or not)?

These questions matter, because the ways that we exist in community matter. The people we turn to for support, the ways in which we provide that support to those that need or ask for it, and how we build and grow a network of communal connection, these are all ways that community impacts our everyday lives.

Organizing around cube—a format in many ways defined by its decoupling from the corporation profiting off of gambling-adjacent booster packs, manufactured scarcity, and union-busting Pinkertons—feels appropriate and important. Especially in a time when cube is not solely understood as vintage cube (traditionally filled with artificially scarce, powerful cards), I want to focus on the radical side of this subsection of Magic culture. Why play this format of all formats?

Boggs writes, “The responsibility of revolutionary leadership in times of crisis is... to project a vision that encourages grassroots creation of positive alternatives.”

In cube, there already exists a positive alternative that removes itself from the necessity of capital and endless acquisition, but the same cannot be said for most aspects of the world. Working towards a better future will involve time and energy. Who will do this work? Is it you?

As I mentioned above, my closest friends in the cube space are people I met through an organizing effort to support a union of game store workers here in NYC. We’ve organized events to raise money for the union’s strike fund by hosting cube nights at the union office or a fundraiser stream. We’ve organized parties for the union members. We’ve distributed flyers at the different stores to ensure other customers are aware of the union effort. The organizing came first, but cube is the reason any of us play Magic together at all.

A question I ask myself all the time is, “what are you here to do?” “Here” means this planet; “here” means this lifetime. I feel strongly that I am here to make this world a better place—something I think many people identify with—and that organizing is the way that will happen.

When someone I’m close to makes it clear that organizing and politics is not a priority for them, I ask:

“Why not?”

“What is more important to you than this?”

“If not now, then when?”

I ask these questions to you now, fellow cube enthusiast. You already organize people into pods of different sizes, into spaces defined as grassroots alternatives.

I hope that you take this as an opportunity to be called into an expansion of your organizing. Here are some ideas on ways to get started:

- Organize a cube event with your cube group in your city/area that raises funds for those in need
- Start a political education reading group and discuss articles/books/videos that interest you (could meet before cube night!)
- Work with a local game store or school to organize a toy/game drive that distributes free supplies to children from low-income families (not just around the holidays!)

You’re already committed to the people you cube with; you could make them the people you organize with outside of that sphere, too. If not, what’s stopping you?

1. <https://walkerart.org/magazine/radical-play>

2. <https://colorcollectivepress.com/products/1972-organization-means-commitment-grace-lee-boggs>

OUSTS AND MURDERS

by Lincoln Davidson

Foreword

And there sat in the circle at the Players' Club one who spoke always with the accent of authority, giving firmly the impression that his own story and the story of Cube were two inseparable strands of the same woof. Indeed, he sometimes referred casually and hazily to five seasons passed at dear old Renton. But one day some one asked him point-blank what his role there had been. He had to explain then that his talent had always been devoted to designing the removal packages for the MTGO Holiday Cube. Finally he showed an old Channel Fireball article, dug up from the depths of the Internet Archive. There his name was at the head of the article and above it was the title of his Cube-inspired musings—*Ousts and Murders*.

Eleven Methods for Providing Feedback on a Cube: A Primer for the Non-Confrontational and Conflict-Averse

1. Typed in the Notes app on your phone and shared on social media as a screenshot.
2. Spoken into a tin can attached via string to another tin can.
3. Left as an unsent draft email in an email account you and the other designer both have access to.
4. Assembled from words cut out of your back catalogue of unread *New Yorker* issues, pasted to a sheet of paper, and left in their mailbox in the middle of the night.
5. Encoded in the first letter of each paragraph of a *Washington Post* article.

6. Printed on one of those big banners they pull behind planes at the seashore.
7. Spoken aloud, disguised as incoherent and vaguely threatening musings on the nature of *Quercus palustris* growth patterns under drought conditions.
8. Tied to the leg of a carrier pigeon that surely will make it there, right?
9. Telepathically.
10. Displayed on a billboard in a city the cube designer has never visited, will never visit, and in all likelihood doesn't even know exists.
11. Mulled over in your head for long enough that you convince yourself that they've definitely figured out your concerns by this point.

Tables for Two: CubeCon

Luke's Cafe

6115 U.S. Hwy 51, McFarland, WI 53558

There's no crosswalk at the intersection of Route 51 and Burma Road—you have to scurry halfway across, pausing in the median, during gaps in traffic. This high-stakes game of Frogger has the unintended function of bringing your body into a higher level of alertness, a useful jolt at eight in the morning after three consecutive days of cubing. The

coffee that awaits you on the other side, served from classic glass caraffes by the welcoming staff of Luke's Cafe, is already very good, but made all the more flavorful by the daring required to achieve it.

Luke's Cafe is unassuming in the manner of most restaurants of its type. Nestled in downtowns or along major arterials across our country, dishing up quality meals for the right price, and serving as the de facto meeting space of many a Rotary Club, activist group, or political committee, they are everything the big diner chains are not: responsive to the local appetite, well used but well cared for, and welcoming and wholesome. Spend much time in a place like Luke's, and you almost begin to think Norman Rockwell paintings portray something real about the world.

On a recent Sunday morning, a group of out of state visitors in Madison for a conference on randomness and optimization found themselves wondering over breakfast whether Luke was a real person or merely a brand adopted by the all-female staff to convey the image of the kind of genial Midwestern man who loves musky fishing and calls everyone more than 5 years younger than him "champ". "Yes, Luke is

the owner,” a waitress offered.

Conversation shifted to the menu options that had the most EV, shifting rapidly from best skillet (table consensus was the Lumberjack Skillet--the California Skillet was good, but suffered from under-ripe avocados) to best side (toast, with one holdout for pancakes) to Luke’s Signature Hot Sauce (flavorful, but could use some more heat) to the surprising quality of the coffee (some of the best diner coffee anyone at the table had ever had). Speculation abounded about the daily special, the Ultimate Skillet. Intriguing, but much too intense for this early in the morning.

Also intriguing: a drive-through window on the side of the cafe, perhaps something of a concession to the modern American’s desire for convenience and never leaving the comfort of their SUV. Whatever the motivation, it doesn’t detract from the ambience or the quality of the food, which was excellent.

A large group walked in (the nearby high school football team’s name on a hoodie revealing them to be locals). The interlopers finished their coffees and paid their checks--their table was needed. Plus, they had a Cube to sticker. (*Dishes \$10-\$15.*)

A BUDDHIST RAMBLING OF CUBE

by NateLikes Frogs

In the summer of 2017, I took a pilgrimage to a secluded Buddhist monastery in rural Indiana. Sheltered by miles of forest and kept secret from the general populace, the monastery harbored some of the Midwest's oldest and most traditional Mahayana buddhist practitioners. My journey was led by a professor of religion I was studying under at the time, and I sought to speak with one of the monks in hopes of discovering some sort of ultimate truth.

My professor was a well known entity at the monastery. He had visited, interviewed, and prayed with a majority of the monks since the early 1970s. While he was welcomed with open arms, I was an outsider hoping to gain favor. While he drank tea and joined meditation circles, I was tasked with joining the monastics-in-training on chore duty.

I spent most of the time performing labor while at the monastery. I swept the temple, polished statues, and helped collect grains. As a young, impatient twenty-something, I found myself getting tired of the labor quite quickly; I had come to reach enlightenment, after all, not to be a guest maid. Buddhism forbids monks from seeking donations directly, and as such have many things set up to be self-reliant. One morning, I ventured to a chicken pen to collect eggs for a daily shared meal. In the pen, I discovered one of the older monks inspecting some hens. I said my pleasantries and focused on the task ahead of me. As I filled my egg basket and turned to head back to the monastery, he put a hand on my shoulder to stop me.

“Young Nate, may I ask why you have joined Dr. Niu on his visit this summer?”

It was shocking to hear the question, let alone that this monk had remembered my name. I remember rambling about my studies of Buddhism and being intrigued by the notion that they believed we all could reach enlightenment. I told him of my desire to speak privately with a monastic in hopes of receiving the secret truth that would make me understand life. He nodded the entire time and let me finish my spiel before turning to pick up one of the hens.

“Which part of this chicken is its essence? What part of this beast makes it what we call a chicken? If we stripped it of its feathers, or perhaps lobbed off its feet, would we still call it that? If she stopped producing eggs, would we call her just a bird? How do we as human beings decide that something has enough chicken-ness?”

We both stopped and chuckled at his choice of words, but I was amazed nonetheless. He was trying to connect me back to the core teachings of Buddhism—the idea of no self. The idea that all things—humans, animals, inanimate objects, ideas—all lack a permanent identity. Nothing is made up of one thing, nothing is permanent. We live in a transient world where being permanently attached to anything is the root of all suffering. While getting deep into my studies, I had lost sight of this intrinsic part of the discipline. And while I was no longer going to get my private-lesson-in-enlightenment like I had hoped, I kind of did at the same time. In a more story-esque way than I could have imagined, I discovered my truth in a chicken pen.

Now that you have heard this story, you may be asking yourself what the heck it has to do with cube or Magic: the Gathering at all. Well, I believe that the same guiding principles of Buddhism can be used in cube design and in our relationships with the game. As products churn out more often and the game evolves, it is important to reflect on how your attachments to the game may impact your cube designing and cubing experience. See some ways below that you can use Buddhist practices in your cube practices!

1. Impermanence: Allow Cards to Flow

This is a detachment practice that I think most cube designers are already comfortable with. We have all heard the Ship of Theseus metaphor used in the cube

space; your cube is made of many pieces that have come and gone, yet it is still the same cube. Allow yourself to make cuts, even if it hurts. Even if it is the retro frame foil you saved up to be able to include. Lamenting a card and refusing to cut it when needed will impede the true nature of your cube. Allow yourself to emotionally detach from the card and take solace in the fact that nothing is stopping you from reintroducing it when the time is right.

2. Iconoclasm: the Smashing of Icons

As cube grows through the magic community, certain people will naturally emerge as leaders and icons of the format. The practice of iconoclasm asks for you to reject these icons. While there is nothing wrong with listening to a podcast and engaging about a hobby online, giving others power to dictate the truths about your hobby will negatively impact your cubing experience. Ignore when others tell you not to run second-order interaction. Embrace that your cube experience has just as much breath and life as those that decide to talk about their experience online. Essentially, it is your cube and you can do it how you wanna!

3. Abandon Heuristics

Heuristics are made to be an onboarding tool. They are short cuts that reduce cognitive load, which is generally good. But once you begin delving deep into a hobby, area of study, etc., it is better to abandon heuristics in order to avoid stagnation. You cannot make new observations if you are stuck on the old ones. This practice has already started creeping up in the cube-mainstream, thanks to the work of Usman the Rad and his writing, *Challenging Cube Dogma*. A cube is still a cube if it is 360 cards, 361 cards, or 1000 cards. You are still cubing if you pass a busted pack 1 pick 1 to take a pet card instead.

4. Embrace Your Ability: we Can all be Lucky Paper Radio

Another core principle in Buddhism is that all people are capable of achieving Buddhahood. We can all be enlightened if we work towards it. The same is true for cubing and ties into the point of iconoclasm. We could all be cube mini-celebrities if we

recorded ourselves and put our thoughts out there for others to view. The only thing stopping you from being the next big cube podcasters is effort and resources. You may be impressed by someone who talks a lot about cube or has many followers, but you are only a few steps away from the same achievements.

5. R, Instant: Shock Your Expectations

Subversion of expectations is a Buddhist practice used to challenge how we perceive reality and interact with our surroundings. The greater the shock factor of a subversion, the greater it will challenge a mind to warp and accommodate this new information. If you're a vintage cuber, try a pauper cube or a set cube. If you only ever play Bun-style or synergy based environments, give a go at cubes with more variance. Pick the multicolor 4-drop p1p1 over a fetchland. Making big change ups to how you approach cube will make you better at cubing and can reset your brain.

6. Reconnect with the Core of Cube

If you have read this far into this article, in this cube zine, you are likely a deeply enfranchised cuber. You may agonize over what cuts to make in new sets, or perhaps get anxiety about getting your cube environment to the perfect configuration. It is only natural to think and ruminate on things we care so deeply about. However, in a similar sense of how I got lost looking for my tantric truth, do not get lost trying to discover the truth of cube. Reconnect with the many things that draw us into cube in the first place. For many, this is community, story telling, and the infinite sandbox of cards that allows us to create memories with others. If you stripped every cube of its Cobra-overview and took all the thought & theory away, I am certain you would still love it.

TALKING ABOUT PATHS WITH KADE GOFORTH

by Alex Houstoun

If I were trying to keep it simple I could say *Recross the Paths* is an interview podcast about the *Magic: the Gathering* format known as cube. The issue I find with this approach is that it does not feel entirely accurate.

Starting in June of last year, Kade Goforth has released thirty episodes of *Recross the Paths* and in them he talks to various folks who he has come to know primarily through *Magic* and cube *and* these conversations do touch upon the various cubes and game variants the guests have designed *and yet*. . . I do not know if what the podcast is really about is what one does with *Magic: the Gathering* cards. Instead, *Recross the Paths* is something like listening to a pleasant conversation in which Kade, with a calming voice and enthusiastic curiosity, gives his guests room to explore and expound and talk about all the things that they may associate with, and enjoy about, *Magic* that don't always tie in to the game itself. Each episode is an organic, flowing conversation and if it veers from the presumed topic—the path, if you'll permit a cliché—*Magic* and cube, all the better.

Fearing that I was doing a lot of projecting and completely misunderstanding someone's work—actually the purpose of the podcast is precise interviews about cube design and theory—I reached out to Kade and he was kind enough to exchange some emails and answer some questions in what I can only hope reads like an epistolary version of *Recross the Paths*.

AH: The first episode of *Recross the Paths* officially released on June 25, 2024. If you'll forgive the direct way of asking. . . What inspired you to start a podcast? More so, start a podcast in 2024. Is this your first experience working in the medium or do you have some history with creating podcasts?

KG: Oddly, *Recross the Paths* didn't start as a podcast. I have a background in music and some amateur experience recording on a USB microphone but nothing that would have qualified as podcasting. I often thought that interviews would be a great channel to get to know others and I love listening to conversations in that format on radio and podcasts. I'd kicked around the idea of *some* kind of interview project for a number of years but I hadn't found the right spark to get it off the ground. In 2023 I was actively curating my own cube and chatting with my friend Bones about cube and custom design and looking to do more with it. At his recommendation, I was able to travel to CubeCon that autumn which—as it tends to do—led to a wealth of fresh and fascinating connections. I wish I could remember what clarified the intersection for me but I realized that I wanted to practice the craft of interviews and the cube space represented a deep pool of creative folks who all enjoyed talking about what they're working on.

I asked Greg, the curator of Companion Cube, if he'd be willing to let me record a conversation about it and he graciously agreed. I plugged in my old equipment, hopped on the first recording app I could find, and hit record. He was marvelously patient as I felt my way through the whole recording, making suggestions along the way, re-doing segments, even starting over at one point. I'm grateful to Greg for being a fabulous guide and guinea pig for something that didn't have a clear outcome yet. We recorded that chat in January of 2024 and on May 28th I made the edited audio of the conversation available in a Cube Discord as a standalone link ambitiously labeled "Interview 1." I found the outcome of sharing the work electric and immediately wanted to do more. I drafted a set of goals for myself and the project, began contacting other potential guests, and re-released Greg's interview as the first official episode on June 25th.

Comically, the podcast remained unnamed for several episodes. I debated for a long time about what to call it, throwing around all sorts of ideas. Names are profound

in their ability to convey a wealth of meaning in a small package. I felt early on that I wanted to use something Magic-related for the title but I didn't want something I'd be embarrassed by in a few years. An early option I liked was "Shared Discovery" but it turns out *another* Magic podcast had just begun under that title about a year prior. Perhaps my favorite that I'm glad I didn't use was "Up the Bean Talk." That one's free for whoever needs it. "*Recross the Paths*" captured the feeling I was hoping for—a thoughtful exploration to take part in on your own and with others.

AH: I agree that there is something special, profound, and powerful about naming, names, and what that may communicate. At the risk of now undermining that sentiment, can you elaborate on the name "*Recross the Paths*" and what you intended for it to convey? I ask in part because what stands out to me about the name is the implication within "recross". It suggests a familiarity with the subject or that the paths to be taken may have been previously encountered—to recross implies an initial crossing. And yet, each episode thus far has featured a new, unique perspective on game design within the framework of Magic and curated limited formats such as cube, 5 Alive, Hanamikoji etc. As far as I am concerned, I do not think a single path has been recrossed—rather, a lot of new paths have been introduced to the audience.

KG: That's a fair challenge! I first want to acknowledge that each episode offering unique perspectives is a testament to the breadth of passion and experience in the cube community. Interviews are necessarily same-y to a degree. That's something I've struggled with from the beginning. There's a value in format and familiarity and having guideposts helps keep ideas pertinent. Deviation is also exciting but it's most impactful when there's a pattern from which to break. It's a great joy and relief to me that while conversations may follow similar trajectories, the *way* in which each guest shares makes each one feel refreshingly individual.

When I consider the title "*Recross the Paths*" I don't think of it as *my* path or even the listener's path that's being traveled. My hope is that instead it's the guest's path—the roads they've taken—that we're being led down. They become a park ranger on a hike through their experience, pointing out landmarks and wildlife. I've had more than

one guest suggest that they hadn't taken their time to organize thoughts about their cube like this before and I found that heartwarming. I love championing what others are excited about and if that process is edifying for the listener *and* the guest, all the better.

The other, less interesting reason for the title is that the self-imposed Magic theming meant my options were limited. The title needed to be catchy and quick and hopefully imply a bit of what I was after in a vacuum. I wanted something with a measure of gravitas that didn't take itself too seriously. I decided against portmanteau (in spite of my known love for it) and I didn't want something that felt more trite (like "Chatterstorm"). I pored over pages of Scryfall name searches in those initial weeks looking for something that inferred conversation, connection, and reflection. Ultimately, *Recross the Paths* had the mental hooks to stay where others didn't.

AH: What is your path? Or, what paths have led you to this point?

KG: Being in front of others has long been part of my family DNA. My father was a professional musician and an educator, and my mother has been a speech professor, a public speaker, and an events coordinator. I was brought along into all sorts of forward-facing pursuits from very early on so I quickly learned to roll with the punches on whatever stage I found myself. I've studied music from kindergarten onward so I've been regularly in the performance space. As a trumpet player, most of my work is 'live'—very rarely do I get to record, do multiple takes, or go again for a clean pass. Pursuing amateur recording projects on old laptops with Garage Band was game-changing for me. I could target more precise outcomes and pursue different goals than a live performance affords.

I remember using an old handheld tape recorder to capture pretend radio shows with my younger brother. We learned to edit in different songs or commercials through clever re-recording. One of my earliest 'real' recording projects with other people was to interview my grandparents about how they met and their season in overseas ministry. I brought my laptop and a USB microphone over to their kitchen table and dove right in. I also got to work with my dad running sound for performing groups in outdoor spaces and work in the audio lab during my undergraduate studies. Growing up around music,

performance, and recording meant that the tools were accessible. Not just a normal thing to do but a pursuit I could be proud of. I think after I found my way into the cube space, attaching a bit of it to the airwaves was a natural progression.

I'm not particularly good at touting my own accomplishments. We have old VHS footage of my mom commending little toddler me for being "a helper" and that's how I've always endeavored to be. God has been good to me so I want to be good to others. I aim to be an encouragement where possible and I enjoy offering words of affirmation at each opportunity. Maybe that's corny, but folks don't tend to get a lot of that. One of my personal side quests is to remember my server's name at a restaurant and always call them by their name. It doesn't take much to humanize people. I remember reading that an ideal way to lift people up is to compliment them on things about which they have *choices*—clothes they wear, accessories they carry, *cubes they design*. It makes me feel good to make others feel good.

To that end, championing what others are excited about has felt like an ideal outlet for the season. I definitely don't have enough profound things to populate a weekly content dump each week myself but each person certainly has far more to offer than a single conversation could capture.

AH: How did you find your way into the cube space. . . or, taking it a step back, into Magic more generally?

I think some of what you say hints at what may have made the game appealing—for example, deck construction being an exercise in targeting a precise outcome/sequence of events—but it also seems like this interest in performance, recording, presentation, and uplifting people led and having people speak about Magic and cube design may have been the means to the end. You had the concept of the composition and it's happenstance that the instrument or notes we hear are people talking about a fantasy card game. . . I'll acknowledge that's not the most articulate way to put it but hopefully the point is communicated.

KG: I've always enjoyed games—board, card, video—but Magic was a later addition for me. I started collecting Pokémon cards in the original base set then moved on to

YuGiOh! as more of a game. This was back in the days of rubber-banding your unsleeved deck in your pocket to carry around of course. Somewhere along my high school years, my best friend suggested that I may enjoy Magic. I felt that I was *super* busy with marching band and taekwondo so I pushed it off. Mercifully I dropped anything collectible as I headed off to college but my love for games persisted.

After graduate school, I remember stumbling across the free game of the month on the Xbox 360 Game Pass—*Duels of the Planeswalkers*. If you're ever in doubt whether those ads work, I distinctly recall the loading screen that said something to the effect of "Hey, if you're enjoying this you can play *in person* at your *local game store!*" I thought, "I do like this game and I do have a local game store" and the rest is history. I was at the next Friday Night Magic to draft M14 having never drafted before. I first picked Rise of the Dark Realms, followed it up with a foil Sentinel Sliver, and proceeded to construct a trainwreck of a draft deck. I won one game that evening because my second round opponent was helpful enough to walk me through a winning line. The next week I came back, rode a Kalonian Hydra to the top four and lost to the store owner because I forgot that I had a Ranger's Guile in hand to prevent it from getting removed. I was hooked.

In those days I kept a notebook to track the name of each opponent I played, win-loss records, entry costs, and prize payouts. I was under the misguided impression that I should be breaking even on my investment in the game monetarily and it didn't take too long to recognize that as an impossibility. I went through the journey from vowing to never spend more than \$5 on a single to making sure that my Cavern of Souls matched. I floated in and out of Commander but my love for limited was persistent. In the early days I would have said that it 'leveled the playing field' and that I didn't want to play against someone's wallet. As I've grown I can honestly say that I just prefer the puzzle of crafting what I can from novel pieces. Don't get me wrong, I still enjoy Commander from time to time, I love Old School and much of Vintage, I'm just not in a season where I can keep up with a rotating competitive metagame.

Enter cube. I'm fascinated by the intricacy of Magic's rules and I love helping people so I was certified as a Judge in 2017. Bones was one of the folks I connected with early on as I was helping mentor other area Judges and he was (and is) an active

evangelist for cube. The history is a bit fuzzy on what happens exactly when, but in some sequence: I offer feedback on Bones' ever-evolving Pokémon custom cube, we begin working on projects together, and he ultimately convinces me to build a cube. I've been dabbling in the format ever since and it's done a stellar job of scratching the itch for me of creating perpetually novel play experiences.

I don't know that I can ascribe a super-deep meaning to it necessarily. Magic as a game engine is incredible and it has a stickiness that most other games don't. It's a game about expression and the breadth allows for so much space for individuality. While the exponentially-expanding card pool can be a barrier to some, the scope of the game feels like a sandbox to me. There are so many pieces to play with and there is still so much space to explore, even with over 35000 unique pieces presently.

I do enjoy bringing people together and cube can be a vehicle for that. I don't think of it as paralleling performance so much as I don't have a target for my own play as much as for the experience of others (specifically when I'm hosting). I mean, I like winning of course, but that's less important to me than doing a thing I enjoy—I guess that makes me a Johnny (in addition to a Vorthos and Melvin)? The podcast isn't supposed to be performative either. My hope is that production value doesn't mean that it feels 'produced.' It's probably lofty but I want conversations to be individual and meaningful, notably *not just content*. If I feel like I'm just checking the box for the week I need to stop. I've also found that while the structure is valuable—like a composition as you suggest—there's so much to be gained by going off book when it's appropriate.

AH: What is clear both from what you've shared thus far in this context, and in the podcast itself, is that the production value is a labor of love and reflection of your own interests. As you put it, Magic has an incredible game engine that allows for a lot of creative building, divergence, variations, etc. within the framework of Magic but it also has this way of enabling you to graft or apply your other interests to the game and broader "hobby".

Many folks can relate to the misguided belief, or hope, when they are starting out that they can somehow break even by grinding limited and getting good enough but keeping a notebook to track that, and general wins and losses, is also something done

because, you know, you like some aspect of journaling. As much as I am typically loath to admit it, I enjoy writing and making zines and, while in a lull between other projects, thought one about Magic would be a way to satisfy my general desire to write and send my words and the words of others out into the world. Yeah, the words are about this game in a sense but they're really not. . . It's about the process or something more. . . you know?

Writing that out provided me with a little more clarity and insight as to what I was trying to get at before: is *Recross the Paths* really a podcast about Magic and cube? I mean, yes it is in one sense but also. . . As you note, and I think is clear from listening to any of the episodes, the conversations you have are unique and really more focused on the guest's individual experience and perspective both within and outside of the game engine. That engine, or initial setting, is a starting point but there seems to be little pressure or desire to follow a set path beyond making sure that the journey ends at the same closing question.

KG: I like to think that *Recross the Paths* allows for guests to go as far beyond the game as they want. I find that while Magic draws players from a wide variety of backgrounds, most folks find a value in the escapism side of the game. There can be a strength in the experience being largely agnostic of the woes of the "real world." That said, I want to give space to unpack the parts of life that guests want to explore through the craft. I've had conversations that touch on topics like identity, war, family, and more to varying degrees of intensity. I don't want to curtail those thoughts, especially as they pertain to the ethos of a project, but it's not required that a cube be grounded in anything *non-cube*. If you're most excited about how to make five-color cards work, let's talk about that. If you're most excited about how to make your projects accessible to your local marginalized community, let's talk about that.

Mark Rosewater spoke on a multitude of reasons that Magic is great on a recent Drive to Work episode and it's hard to overstate just how many avenues of the game there are to enjoy. One of his summary thoughts on that program that has rattled around in my brain is that, in his estimation, Magic has broadly been a "force for good." It draws people together, helps build skills, provides creative outlets. One of my hopes

for *Recross the Paths* is that it acts in that vein. By celebrating each person in their uniqueness, if I get to make even one person's day a bit brighter, I can be pleased with that.

As a quick behind the scenes as far as starting and ending, I typically work from an outline of potential questions but my goal is to *not* be scripted. If conversation flows away from what I've marked down then we're definitely following where the thought leads instead of going back to question #3. Cube is certainly the catalyst and often the jumping-off point, but the sky is the limit. Every chat has deviated from my expectations in one way or the other and I find that charming.

AH: Speaking of an outline—forgive me, not the most elegant segue—are there projects and things you are looking forward to in this year both related to *Recross the Paths* and otherwise?

KG: It's maximally corny, but I'm looking forward to continuing doing interviews. I didn't know if or how long this project would go but I've been so stoked week to week to connect with more amazing folks in the space. As long as it's tenable I'm hoping to keep going. Travel is likely limited for the season but I'm also hoping to attend at least one major cube event before the year's end. There are so many more choices now but that likely means I can make at least one. I've also been slowly working on a new cube project that I hope will be in a testable space soon. My primary goal on the overview is "Don't get stressed" so I'm taking it as inspiration strikes. Watch this space.

The project I'm most looking forward to this year though is baby number three due in just a few months. Halfway to a full draft pod!

AH: How exciting, congratulations! It can take a lot of time and effort to build a local community, but look at you go!

Well, I kind of wanted to end this conversation by asking if you've played any particularly good or enjoyable games lately—I am interested in hearing what you may have to say in response to that—but I am now curious if you have any notable games you play with the kids or family broadly. I spent a good chunk of this time last year playing

Candyland with my kids and came to deeply loath the game (apparently that's a common sentiment?!). We've moved on to more engaging stuff but I am always interested in how folks who may spend a lot of their free time thinking about card/board games may approach the medium with children.

KG: It turns out that I'm a bit of a board game snob. Kickstarter was a vice for a bit so I have a bunch of boutique board games of a variety of flavors (and quality). My favorite is still *Millennium Blades*, a sprawling CCG simulator by Level 99 Games with over a thousand unique cards in the box—a bit heavy for most occasions of course. *Flamecraft* has also been a recent favorite for the adults in the family, a charmingly-illustrated village builder where you visit and develop shops run by tiny, helpful dragons. We were also gifted *Harmonies* over the holidays and have been enjoying it as a clever spatial-reasoning game where you try to balance habitats for animals. I have less time to play video games these days, but in that space *A Short Hike* has been a delight to play. It's brief, thoughtful, and beautifully rendered. I also spent my season with *Balatro* and it's dangerously replayable.

For games with kids, I've been a big fan of *Tsuro: The Game of the Path*. It's a simple tile-laying game where the objective is to keep your piece on the board. The rules are simple—play a tile, move along the path, draw a new tile—and easy enough for children to understand. Importantly, it allows for agency in a non-dire way, something many kid-focused games don't do well (like *Candyland*!). It's my go-to gateway game for players of all ages. I've played this with my grandparents and my seven-year-old currently loves it. He even draws his own custom tiles for fun!

AH: Wonderful, I am going to add all of these to my list of games to try and get to at some point. . . I suppose whenever I discover more hours in the day and the energy to do more than wonder why it isn't bedtime.

It has been a real treat speaking with you. Thank you kindly!

KEEPING UP

by Jane McKinney

Untap. Keep up. Draw.

Kept up by new ideas. What if I put forty Blasted Landscapes into my new cube? What if I MDfC back-sleeved every single card with an old border Chromatic Sphere? What if I cut ten cards from long before I learned to file taxes? What if I joined that podcast (surely not)? What if they're lovely folks (surely yes)? What if I can't afford the next CubeCon? What if I sell the most expensive card I've ever owned? What if I invited my priest to draft night? What if I invited my draft night to church? The gays leading the gays, either way(s). I keep my hand close, perhaps, but my queers closer.

Untap. Keep up. Draw.

Keeping up—a new set just dropped. Sixteen thousand new cards, all itching for eyes to land on them; flies to the ointment; flies on the vine. Spoilers so abundant as to make a hunter-gatherer cry: poiling—spoiling—on the vine, untouched, unneeded. Evolutionary excess, accessory fruit, whose enormous hard pits would be utterly useless—obtusely intrusive—in that elusive world devoid of corporate megafauna. A rare *monotropa uniflora*, maturing in the shade, small ephemeral beauty from the moldering sludge of discarded vegetal matter. An uncommon sight, stumbled upon, dwelt upon, perfect for your own environ.

Untap. Keep up.

Keep up with the discourse. The discord. The Discord. Things smart people recommend you like. Things dumb people should feel bad for enjoying (sarcasm, of course: so easily spotted, in its high-visibility neon orange). Someone you know is having a hard week. Someone you don't know is having an aneurysm (metaphorically, of course; every trustworthy, peer-reviewed study shows that no one's blood pressure has ever been adversely affected by a children's card game (citation needed)). LLCs whose MOs require M&As whose EOY ROIs pad RSAs for CEOs. Wide-eyed children developing a lifelong love of fantasy, and an appreciation for the arts, and learning to escape the gloom of it all, and coming out as queer, and surviving in this hostile world. Cute dogs. Cuter owners. Cutesy projects. Someone who lives on another planet is hosting a cardboard party. Mid-July. You won't be there. NASA's being defunded, you know?

Untap.

You're tapped. Energetically, perhaps—financially, otherwise—creatively, likely—spiritually, definitely—emotionally, assuredly. You're exhausted by the State of Things, wracking your brain for answers to the threats you see dropping all around. You're keeping up, if drawing a blank. Keeping up; the upkeep of that box of rectangles is an upkeep of the soul; a rearrangement of shapes made of finer stuff, or perhaps of the same rough atoms, to keep the thread taut but not cut. The curative curation of moving parts and creative false starts keeping your head up. Keeping the tap-tap-tap of the world as an exterior blunt motion, not an interior blunt trauma. Drawing from some inner reserve of strength, kept up by friends, family, loved ones—communities, gatherings, laughter rings, photos of fingerlings (potatoes). Kept up by the souls of others. Kept up by warming letters written in the universal language of hobby joymongering. Kept up by me, driving a new friend to play shitty magic in a bar after their last seizure's damage made motor operation untenable for the time being. Kept up by you, your eyes on the page, absorbing words from another planet, your mind working the subconscious calculus of empathy intended for the next soul to bump up against

yours. Kept up by us, together, and our dogged commitment to a forgettable card game in a forgettable era of a forgettable planet. Kept up by the buoyant amassing of us all. Kept up by the exuberant gassing-up of us all. Kept up by the creative out-classing—the communal spellcasting—the hands holding fast through it all.

Kept up by the quiet passing of it all. This, too, and all that jazz.

CONTRIBUTORS

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