

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
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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

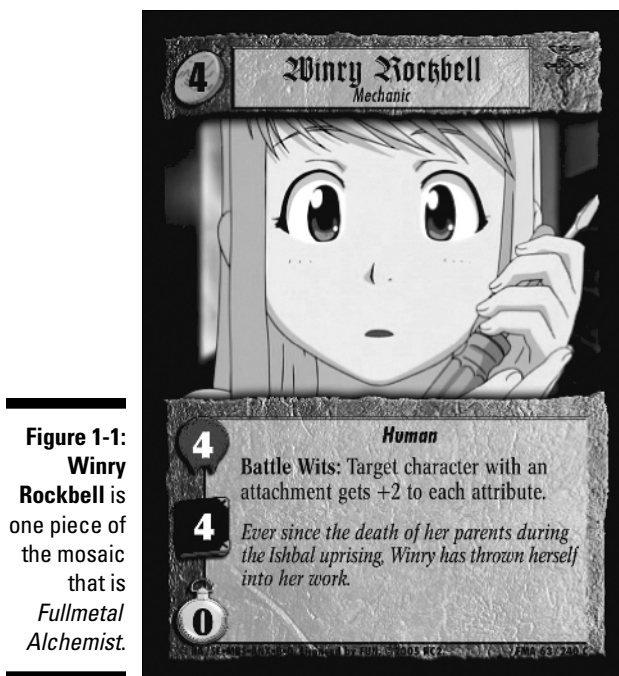


Figure 1-1:
Winry
Rockbell is
one piece of
the mosaic
that is
Fullmetal
Alchemist.

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.

