GO AHEAD, MECH MY DAY!

A PREVIEW OF BATTLETECH, WIZARDS OF THE COAST'S LATEST COLLECTIBLE CARD GAME. BY RICK SWAN.

Humongous killer robots are about to crunch their way across the world of collectible card games.

And they've taken their sweet time getting here.

"The first time I heard about doing BattleTech was in 1993," recalls Richard Garfield, research and development coordinator at Wizards of the Coast and designer of *Magic, Vampire: The Eternal Struggle* and the just-completed *BattleTech* CCG. "In '93, Wizards had *Magic* as a hot property, and we were going around acquiring licenses. One of them was *BattleTech*. So it's been technically in the works for a long time."

Garfield and company snagged the license from the FASA Corporation of Chicago, Ill., creators of the *BattleTech* board game, arguably the most popular science fiction simulation of all time. Set in the 31st Century, *BattleTech* features a war-ravaged universe where power-crazed despots and bloodthirsty mercenaries struggle for control of all humanity. The weapon of choice is the battlemech, a walking tank the size of a water tower capable of leveling mountains and barbecuing city blocks. Since its 1984 debut, *BattleTech* has sold hundreds of thousands of copies in close to a dozen languages. It's also spawned a roleplaying game (*MechWarrior*), 31 novels and over a hundred other Tech-related products. And come November, the first batch of 60-card starter decks and 15-card boosters for the *BattleTech* CCG will hit the stores—nearly three years after it was first discussed.

So why's it taken so long? No particular reason, shrugs Garfield, aside from a lot of false starts. "I worked on it on and off since '93, but none of the designs I did stayed around. The first time I began work in the current incarnation was last spring." And once he got rolling, "it went pretty smoothly." By the end of July, three months after he dug in, the basic design was essentially complete.

In the process, Garfield managed to reduce the mind-bogglingly intricate *BattleTech* universe to its essence, making the card game assessable to those who wouldn't know a mech from a meat loaf. "Familiarity with *Bat-*

tleTech isn't important. If you already know the universe, it'll probably make some of the stuff a little easier to go down. But you can play this game on the level of, 'Wow! Giant walking tanks beating up on each other!' Everybody can appreciate that."

The Game

Though Garfield came up with the concept and mechanics, the fine-tuning fell to co-worker and lead developer Charlie Catino. "At Wizards, we separate the design process into two distinct parts," says the 29-year-old Catino, a Chicago native who also served as lead developer for *Alliances*, the recent *Magic* expansion. "First, there's the actual design of the set. And then, the developer takes the set and makes sure it's fun and balanced and interesting."

BattleTech, it turns out, has more than its share of interesting cards. Catino walks us through the categories.

BattleMechs. "There are tons of different mechs," says Catino. "Small ones, large ones, ones that can do a lot of damage, ones that can take a lot of damage. Out of the approximately 350 cards in the set, roughly 150 are mechs." Each mech has an attack rating, three speed ratings—slow, medium and fast—and two defense ratings, armor and structural. (Damage points not absorbed by armor are taken as structural damage. When a mech suffers an amount of damage equal to its structural rating, it becomes scrap metal.) A mech may also be armed with special weapons, such as missiles or lasers. "Mechs are definitely the focal point of the game. It'll be hard for people to construct mech-free decks."

Resources. Mechs can't be deployed until they're paid for and built. That's where resource cards like factories and funds come in. One of the best, according to Catino, is War Funds. "People might notice a slight resemblance between War Funds and the Black Lotus from *Magic*," he claims. How so? He won't say. "That's just a hint."

Missions. "These are one-time events that help your mechs or hinder enemy mechs," says Catino. "There are some cool ones that allow you to do some really nasty things." An example: Topple. "This involves a maneuver where I push over my opponent's mech. When battlemechs fall, they weigh so much that they actually damage themselves." Another: Forged Mission Orders. "This allows