

LIVE LONG AND PROSPER —

How a *Star Trek* card game quietly continues, 10 years after its official end

CYRUS FARIVAR - 12/30/2017, 7:30 AM

Earlier this year, I was back at my childhood home in Southern California, digging through some old boxes. Amidst assorted baseball cards, long-forgotten school projects, sports trophies, and more, I located a small, slender white cardboard box.

The box is unmarked, except for a small sticker in the top left-hand corner with my name on it. But I knew what it was the instant I saw it: my entire collection of *Star Trek Customizable Card Game (STCCG)*, probably a couple hundred cards in total.

While I never had any A-List cards (I never lucked out on any Enterprise bridge crew for instance), I quickly found the few that I set aside in plastic sleeves: Lt. Jg. Jean-Luc Picard, Montgomery Scott, and even Mot the Barber. Nostalgia washed over me. The cards were just as I had left them, likely more than two decades ago, replete with slips of paper marking the different types: "Missions," "Equipment," "Federation Ships," and more. This box hadn't been opened since I put them away back in high school.



Somewhere along the way, I had just stopped playing—I grew older, plus I never knew that many people who also played CCG. Its community paled in comparison (in terms of size at least) to deck-building card games that broke into the mainstream like [Magic: The Gathering](#) or *Pokemon*. These days, many people likely would never even have known this game once existed if not for "The Greatest Generation" podcast. As a regular-listening fan, I [sent them some packs from eBay](#) back in April. By summer, [those packs](#) became part of a new comedy bit on the show.



Nevertheless, I took those cards home after finding them that day. Months later, they sat dormant, a victim of the same old problems. I still didn't have anyone to play with. Worse still, I didn't even remember how to play. And that's when I finally turned to the Internet on one quiet afternoon. Eventually, I discovered three amazing facts.

- First, CCG is officially dead, its [last official expansion pack was released](#) in December 2007. However, a group of dedicated CCG fans have banded together online not only to keep its memory alive, but to play and organize tournaments an entire decade later.
- Second, that group, which calls itself the [Continuing Committee](#), creates *new* cards to add to the existing universe. And lastly, with the game out of print for so long and the original publishing company on financial life support, CCG is now entirely free to play.
- This means you, fellow *Star Trek* fan, can combine an online deck builder, a printer, and some plastic card sleeves to be playing within *hours*. And a vibrant, welcoming community keeping this game alive will be ready and waiting.

[License to nerd](#)

I started my trip down CCG memory lane like I would any nostalgia trip: [Wikipedia](#). As you might expect based on the dedication this card game seems to inspire, the entry on CCG is robust: it outlines the myriad expansion packs that came out long after I stopped playing, circa 1996, including *First Contact* and *Enterprise Edition*. The very bottom of the Wikipedia entry first introduced me to the Continuing

Committee (CC), but I still had more questions than answers. What was the lasting appeal of this game; have I been missing out? And if I did get back into it, could I use the cards I already had?

Looking at the Continuing Committee website, it's clear this represents a labor of love. The site didn't render very nicely on my iPhone. The "[About Us](#)" page was simply an org chart. But despite its archaic and cluttered design, everything appeared to be active. Players were to this very date organizing themselves into tournaments in locales as varied as a jazz club in Vienna, Austria and a Panera Bread in Highland Heights, Ohio. A link at the bottom of the site labeled "Rulebook" linked to a [six-page PDF](#) outlining how to play what appeared to be a spinoff game, Tribbles. I was nowhere closer to re-learning the actual STCCG game, but I certainly was on to something.

Eventually, I connected with Maggie Geppert, a 37-year-old [physics professor at Harper College in Palatine, Illinois](#). She's the new acting director of operations at the Continuing Committee, and she graciously connected with some card-finding stranger for a nearly two-hour phone call. I started by explaining my situation and describing the cards now strewn across my desk.

"You have First Edition cards," she patiently told me. In CCG lingo, these are known as "1E" cards.

While the [Wikipedia entry](#) explained that there was a first and second edition of the game, it wasn't clear that these iterations were not really compatible with one another. Yes, there are some cards that can be played across editions, but by and large, that's not how it's done.

"1E has to play other 1E," Geppert said. The first edition of the game still draws players—with a new expansion appearing on January 12, 2018—though Second Edition generally has more.

So while my cards were neat keepsakes, I would want to get hold of some 2E cards to really explore playing again.

Decipher Inc., the Virginia-based publisher of CCG, released the first edition and ran with those cards from 1994 until 2002. At that point, the game was redesigned to make it modern and more streamlined. (Decipher's more popular card game, [Star Wars: The Customizable Card Game](#), which ran from 1995 until 2001, has spawned a similar fan site, also called the Continuing Committee.) The company evidently had concerns about the bloat and complexity that built up with 1E over time, and this made the game harder to learn and caused gameplay imbalances in certain ways. 2E ran for another five years before, as Geppert explained, "Decipher lost their license," and the game ceased production in 2007.

While I appreciated the history lesson, I was admittedly crestfallen. I couldn't use the cards I already had? I had to scour eBay for 2E cards, which seemingly were a bit more expensive than 1E cards?

I didn't need to spend a dime, Geppert reassured me. With the license a thing of the past, the CC currently offers a full list of printable cards, pre-made decks, and even an online deck builder. Most people don't play with officially made cards anymore, she said. They simply color print the ones they want and slide them in front of old CCG cards (or even [Magic: The Gathering](#) cards) in a plastic sleeve.

"We discourage people from printing them on cardstock because they are indistinguishable from cards that were produced—that would get us in trouble," she said.

I remembered that like Magic, CCG's decks could get into the dozens of cards. More cards meant a larger arsenal, but it also meant that it might take longer to get to the heart of it and allow a strategy to unfold. The pre-made decks CC has available come with names like "[Khaaaaaaaan! To beat Nick with](#)" or "[Where There's Cake, There's Hope \(2.2\)](#)."

Geppert remained encouraging—I could learn again. She explained that she was taught the game by some friends back in college.

"They were like, 'Here take all these extra cards, learn the game and you should come play with us,'" she said. "We had bonded over *Star Trek*. My Dad and my Mom are both big *Star Trek* fans. I'd already watched [TNG](#)—I loved [DS9](#)—having this game that I could play with my friends was a lot of fun. We would sit around on Friday nights and watch Spike TV and watch reruns. We'd eat pizza and watch *Star Trek* and play *Star Trek*—that was our Friday nights."

Geppert was speaking my language: most of my freshman year at UC Berkeley, Saturday nights at midnight Pacific Time meant diving into my standing IRC *Star Trek* role playing game.

Eventually, Geppert found players as she moved around the US, in Boston and then greater Chicago. Years later, she found the CC and eventually rose through its all-volunteer ranks. The group, which has existed solely as a group of fellow fans with a website to date, is in the process of incorporating as a formal 501(c)3 nonprofit organization.

"[Gameplay-wise] it does feel like *Star Trek*: you have your missions, you play personnel and ships and equipment, and you go off and do missions," Geppert continued. "The opponent keeps you from doing things that you want to do. Or, you can use cards on your opponent to keep them from doing what they want to do."

While the most conventional way is to play one on one, there are experimental ways to play multiplayer. The CC tournaments are a series of one-on-one games, sometimes held on the sidelines of GenCon or other conventions. But more often than not, they're held at people's homes. Geppert said she recently brought her husband and two young sons on a road trip to [Denison, Texas](#), to play in a weekend tournament. In essence, it's a big, nerdy party no matter the venue.

"It's 22 people sitting at plastic folding tables in a guy's living room, eating fried chicken, drinking a lot of alcohol, and taunting each other," she said. "Some of them were new to me, or I'd only known them online. We had a guy from Minnesota, some guys from the DC area, New Jersey, Florida, Georgia, and even the UK."

The physics professor clearly sees a lasting appeal of Decipher's original game, and she said that by introducing new CC-sanctioned cards, it "keeps the game continually interesting." She sees traffic on the CC website die down if it has been awhile since a newly created expansion, for instance. But to that, Geppert mentioned that there were no current plans to include anything from the J.J. Abrams films or the new series, *Star Trek: Discovery*, out of an abundance of caution.

"We have decided to play it safe in terms of the new material. We think we're pretty safe in terms of staying on the legal side and keeping eyes off us if we stick with the shows that Decipher had a license for," she says. "They had license for the five shows and 10 movies including *Nemesis*. [Using that], we try to keep to a rough schedule of a new release every four months."

She estimated that the CC has "a few hundred active players" spread across the globe, with "big playgroups" in Chicago, Boston, Atlanta, Charlotte, Minneapolis, Seattle, Vancouver, London, Munich, Vienna, Sydney, and San Diego.

"The game is free, come play it!" she encouraged me.

[Crime and punishment](#)

After getting off the phone with Geppert, I wanted to know more of the story from Decipher itself. This turned out to be more difficult than I'd originally thought. Its [website](#) is almost the complete opposite of CC: it's rather thin. It refers to one game that appears to have never been released. There is no contact information of any kind, no reference to CCG or any of its other titles. The company doesn't appear to have released any games in years.

A few Google searches later, a picture started to emerge. During CCG's heyday, the company's top financial executive, Rick Eddleman, stole at least \$1.5 million from Decipher. The financial theft wasn't discovered until 2001. Within years, the company's staff collapsed from 100 people to seven.

In 2009, Eddleman was finally sentenced to more than six years in prison after [pleading guilty](#) to 12 counts of embezzlement.

"I am completely ashamed of everything I've done," Eddleman said in court on the day of his sentencing, according to the [Virginian Pilot](#). "I know one of the worst possible things I've done is to violate the trust of the position I was put in."

Eddleman was more than just a co-worker. He was Decipher founder Warren Holland's childhood friend. Eddleman later married Holland's younger sister, Teri. As the *Pilot* reported in 2009:

His methods were myriad. Eddleman wrote himself two checks every payday, doubling his \$100,000-plus salary. He wrote checks to his wife and children, forged their names and cashed them. He made himself loans and tricked his staff into believing the money had been repaid by distributing the debt throughout the company's books. As finance director, he was supposed to review the company's credit card statements for unauthorized personal expenses. Instead, he racked up hundreds of thousands of dollars in charges himself.

Holland later created a (now-defunct) website, [embezzlementfromdecipher.com](#), which included a cache of lengthy [documents](#) pertaining to the case. The company founder included a 32-page letter with damning descriptions of the entire scheme and a detailed accounting, year by year, of what was stolen and when.

"Rick destroyed nearly 20 years of my work and the work of many talented people at Decipher," Holland [wrote](#) in 2009. "As CEO, I am not without responsibility. As a result, I worked for five years without a salary to try to turn the company around. I also contributed all of my personal assets to the effort. I almost lost my company, and it is still reeling from the fraud."

A few emails and phone calls later, I finally tracked down someone mentioned in that article: President Cindy Thornburg. She appears to be one of the few employees left.

"Decipher had an existing licensing relationship with Paramount and Star Trek, and we had previously licensed the rights to produce a mystery game based on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and two VCR board games," she emailed Ars.

"Two game inventors that we had worked with for many years approached us about doing a collectible/customizable card game based on the *Star Trek* franchise. Shortly thereafter, we negotiated with Paramount and licensed the rights to produce the CCG. In less than a year, we also licensed the rights from Lucasfilm to product a *Star Wars* CCG and expanded our *Star Trek* rights. Later we procured the rights from New Line Cinema to develop a CCG based on *The Lord of the Rings* films. These three products were the company's most popular and successful CCGs."

Thornburg acknowledged that the embezzlement case had taken quite a toll on the company, saying that Decipher is "much smaller now." And as for whether Decipher still maintains the IP to the CCG...

"No," she continued. "The intellectual property owned and developed by Decipher was sold after Decipher suffered an \$8.9 million embezzlement and downsized the company. Decipher has a right of repurchase but naturally the terms and conditions are proprietary (and covered by confidentiality agreements). We presently have no plans to exercise the repurchase option."

Geppert and the CC therefore may be in the clear when it comes to offering create-your-own options to new players so long as they stay away from the post-Decipher *Trek* properties. In fact, Decipher to date has a high opinion of the community this old game has inspired.

"We think it's great that enthusiastic players continue to play the game," Thornburg wrote. "We had very talented game designers, and it's a testimony to them and the players that the CCGs are still vibrant and active today."

[Enter Round Table Pizza](#)

With my curiosity about the game's backstory satiated, there was only one thing left to do. I had cards, now it was time to play.



Through Geppert, I was introduced online to Richard New, a Bay Area stay-at-home father about my age. He'd been playing the game for years and regularly hosted a weekly game night at a Round Table Pizza in Santa Clara. Would I like to join?

On a recent Wednesday night, I walked in. The Round Table Pizza was mostly empty, save for a few people watching football. But soon I was greeted by a friendly 36-year-old fellow wearing a T-shirt with the *Enterprise* emblazoned on it. This was the right place.

New explained that while most of his fellow gamers weren't regular CCG players, he had introduced it to a few of them. While his friends set themselves up with another title, New and I headed into a semi-private room to set up. With our additional supplies ready—a pizza and pitcher of Modelo—New opened up a purple gym bag from his old wrestling days.

"I keep this in my trunk," he said, as if this was the most regular thing in the world.

Inside were at least 15 labeled CCG decks, nearly all 2E cards. And as we chatted, New started unpacking a couple of decks for us. He had me play with an *Original Series* deck (I had Spock!), while he preferred a *Voyager* deck.

He set up the cards, and off we went. We played a semi-open hand game as he walked me through setting up my base (Federation Headquarters) with a couple of ships and five missions. With patience and grace, New talked me through part of a full game. We went over the strategy and the possibilities at each turn.



As we played, things slowly (and mercifully) started to come back to me. I remembered that to win, you needed 100 mission points and that there were Dilemma and Interrupt cards to complicate everything. I had to assemble an away team with different skills and complete missions to earn those points.

After nearly two hours of conversation and gameplay—plus the fact that the Round Table Pizza needed to close for the night—New explained that we were playing far slower than what he was used to. That was OK, however, as he realized it had been awhile. Even while playing with a new face and total 2E n00b, the night had been fun. Clearly, the CC is on to something—this particular card game has definitely held up.

*[Cyrus Farivar](#) is a Senior Tech Policy Reporter at **Ars Technica**, and is also a radio producer and author. His latest book, [Habeas Data](#), about the legal cases over the last 50 years that have had an outsized impact on surveillance and privacy law in America, is due out in May 2018 from Melville House. He is based in Oakland, California.*

Email cyrus.farivar@arstechnica.com // **Twitter** [@cfarivar](https://twitter.com/cfarivar)

<https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2017/12/how-a-star-trek-card-game-quietly-continues-10-years-after-its-official-end/>