

Manuel came back... to play An Old Pro and Magic Online

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I stopped playing **Magic** two years ago. It wasn't that I had lost my drive for the game. Like many others before me, I just couldn't afford to keep up with the constant time and money investment that our passion requires. Work drove me away from **Magic**, and ever since I've been known in my home country of France as a "has been" player.

Months passed by and there was still no sign that I would return to the game. Even tripling of prize money on the Pro Tour wasn't alluring enough. I played in a few tournaments over those two years, maybe even a PTQ or two, but only because they were very close to my city and I had a free weekend. After bombing out at Nationals last year, I thought I was finished with **Magic**. I considered selling all my cards to the local dealer and moving on.

Magic Online brings the whole game to your computer.

Then I heard about **Magic** Online. Ah, well, if it was anything like the unconvincing other **Magic** video games, it didn't promise to be very exciting. A beta was launched, and I was even invited to it. I declined, being too busy anyway with working on my own online game. Later, a few positive echoes about that version from trusted friends lured me into trying. Two weeks ago, I signed up for an account and logged on.

I am now officially addicted to **Magic** Online – you might have seen me under the alias "ManuelBevand" (that's an alias, right?). The program has kept me busy for two weeks, and I keep discovering small amazing things about it every day. **Magic** Online has everything for all **Magic** players and is, as far as I'm concerned, the online **Magic: The Gathering** revolution I was waiting for. It has resurrected my belief in the game so much that I will be playing in my first real-life PTQ in over two years next weekend. Of course, **Magic** Online does not come without controversies and question marks. But we'll discuss those later.

The program itself allows you to play **Magic** on the Internet. That's nothing new. Before this, we've had the Interactive Encyclopedia, and before that, sharewares like the very popular Apprentice (with its pal Netdraft) and the old Netmagic (who remembers the good old days of Netmagic tournaments on #mtg?). But **Magic** Online's play is better than anything I might have expected.

The core of the program is without doubt the duel system. Just like Apprentice, this allows you to play **Magic** duels with real-life opponents (and not computer A.I.s that enchant their **Wall of Swords** with **Animate Wall** twice for the fun of it, like the old Microprose game). There's one major difference you've probably heard about: it knows the rules and does everything needed to enforce them. That alone is very impressive. The program is able to recognize what any card does and translate it correctly in terms of gameplay. That means no cheating allowed, no drawing extra cards, no accidentally skipping phases or forgetting upkeep costs.

By itself, it's a programming tour-de-force. But it is also very intuitive! Click on a land, it will tap and add mana to your pool. Add enough mana and the cards in your hand, in play, or in the graveyard highlight in green when you can play them or use their abilities. Click on a card, it is played and your opponent is given proper time to respond by putting his own spells on the stack. Cast **Firebolt** on your opponent's **Werebear**: the program zooms on Firebolt, paints a virtual arrow to indicate what it is targeting, waits for your opponent's response and then resolves the whole stack. More complicated situations are extremely well handled, and there was virtually no time that I stumbled upon something that just wasn't working.

To put it simply, **Magic** Online is actually superior to real-life **Magic** in many ways:

- No more cheating. Repeat after me: n-o m-o-r-e c-h-e-a-t-i-n-g. (Unless someone hacks it, which is still to be seen.)
- No more incorrect rules interpretations. The program is your personal judge.
- No more forgetting that you can use an ability or spell – that's great if you're new to the game or ignore exactly what the latest mechanics of say, flashback and madness do. Some will argue that it favors the less-skilled players, but anything that can even-up rules knowledge and make games decided by what counts (strategy and calculation) is a good thing.
- Something I find very attractive: no more stalling. Each player has his own 35-minute clock that keeps tracks of every second he spends with priority. When a player's clock runs out, he loses the game. Introducing a new way of losing in **Magic**: taking too much time. The idea was old, as adding chess clocks to real-life tournaments was once considered, but it really shines here.
- No more waiting for hours for the tournament to start, crowded venues, smelly rooms ... no, wait, this is why we love the game, right?
- It keeps tracks of your past games. Want to check back on that game you played three weeks ago because you suddenly realized you might have made a mistake? You can replay all your games.
- It keeps tracks of other player's games. Want to take a look at the Standard environment? Check the constructed tournaments area and look for ended games for a replay.

Card interactions are handled by the computer "judge."

Of course, you might miss the following:

- The atmosphere of a tense tournament
 - The social interaction with your card-playing friends
 - The delight of seeing your opponent's face when you pull off that amazing eleven-card combo
- You can play most of the modern formats if you own the cards. Usually, most people hang out in the 8-player draft rooms, which confirms that booster draft is the most popular **Magic** format. The Standard rooms will usually be crowded with opponents, but you'll have to open a few packs before you can build a decent deck. Keep in mind that common decks are highly playable in the current Standard environment, though you probably won't win many tournaments until you can get your own "real" deck.

Draft, matchmaking, deck construction, sideboarding, and communication are all very well done. Over the past two weeks I've entered about forty drafts, and it really helped me get better! I did lose my first six games in a row because I was completely unfamiliar with the format, but after a few drafts of practice, I really got to know all the cards and their interactions well. It's just like real **Magic**, really, without leaving your home. Great players like Kai Budde and Terry Tsang are seen drafting near the most clueless newbie. On some occasions, the servers get absolutely crowded with people: there were 512-player tournaments on the *Torment* prerelease weekend, and quite a few of them!

One feature I like is that if you get disconnected from the server during a draft (which happens sometimes at this stage of the beta) or if your ISP suddenly drops your connection, you may come back with having missed a few picks. The computer will continue to pick cards for you (they might not be great, but at least it doesn't kick you out), and when you reconnect you can continue drafting.

Coming back from a disconnection is also possible during a game. You have ten minutes before being penalized with a game loss, but don't expect the program to play for you in the meantime...

And now it's time for a few tips for new **Magic** Online players:

Accelerate the tempo: games can drag for quite a while with all the priority-passing that has to be done. What I do is uncheck my opponent's upkeep and beginning of combat phase in "gameplay preferences." That speeds up the game some, and I can always re-activate them if I need to intervene during those phases.

Undo clumsy moves: the game gives you the option to undo mana sources. Simply press the "Alt" key and U to untap one or several lands you mistakenly tapped.

Think twice before mulliganing: sometimes the small "yes" and "no" buttons can be confusing. I forgot to mulligan a hand with no lands once, because I clicked on the wrong button. Sounds stupid, until it happens to you.

Get into drafts!: Drafting is a lot of fun and you'll get into a game very fast since there are always tons of people playing.

Draft against dragons, angels, and atogs from all over the world.

I couldn't end this article without mentioning the hottest topic of the moment: the pricing policy. As you've probably heard, Wizards of the Coast is going to charge the same price for online cards as for real-life cards, with the possibility of trading full sets of online cards for real ones. That announcement has stirred many debates across the **Magic** community.

So the question everyone is facing today is: When the final release is on the shelves and booster packs go for \$3.29, will I keep playing **Magic** Online? My personal answer is: I very well might. Winning an eight-player draft earns you eight packs; placing second earns you four. It will reward the best players while not depriving the others from their drafted cards. Of course, for that price, I will expect an absolutely perfect service: solid servers, less disconnections, more prizes and events, qualifier tournaments, use of the real-life DCI rating, and much more...

It's a challenge Wizards will have to face. Time will tell, but I'll be there!

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