



ONLINE TOURNAMENT CHANGES

Posted in [ARTICLES HOME](#) on February 28, 2003

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In honor of the Wizards Invitational, which starts today, I bring you news of upcoming changes to the organized play system on *Magic Online*. Basically, the Tournament Team took a long, hard look at the way things have been going since we launched. We're generally pretty happy, but we didn't let that stop us from putting together a package of improvements that we think will make things even better.

A New "Casual-Friendly" Booster Draft Queue

The first of our package of changes will kick in next week. We're going to add a new booster draft queue with a much flatter prize schedule. Whereas all 8-person queues currently award 8 boosters to the winner and 4 boosters to the runner up, this new queue will award 4 packs to first, 3 packs to second, 2 packs to third, and 2 packs to fourth. We aren't going to take away any of the existing 8-4 queues, but a number of customers have told us they would prefer the option to play in a tournament where more players are awarded prizes. So we're going to make both prize schedules available and then watch closely to see what players actually prefer.



In addition to providing more options for players, we think this new queue will be much less attractive to "sharks." Many players on *Magic Online* seem to live in constant fear that they will run into Pro Tour players when they draft, and would have no chance to win. On the one hand, I think there aren't nearly as many Pros out there as some people think and on the other hand I think they aren't quite as invincible as other people think. However, it is true that several Pros have "gone infinite" by constantly winning drafts and collecting lots of booster pack prizes. We recognize that this may intimidate some players into avoiding booster draft queues entirely (even if that intimidation isn't wholly called for) so we're setting up this new queue with prizes that won't be nearly as attractive to the Pros.

A 4-3-2-2 payout really isn't very friendly for someone whose goal is to win enough prizes that they can keep drafting "for free." Anything less than first place gives them less than the 3-packs-plus-2-event-tickets entry fee needed for a new draft and even first place provides only a tiny profit. Worse still, there are only 11 total packs given out as prizes instead of 12 so every player's "expected value" is slightly lower.

However, for someone whose goal is to acquire cards, play for fun, and/or to draft just for the sake of drafting, a 4-3-2-2 payout is better. Sure you can never win 8 packs, but you only have to win a single match in order to collect 2 packs and the slightly lower overall payout of 11 packs versus 12 is more than made up for by the fact that the best drafters in the game will tend toward the 8-4 queues.

I'm actually pretty curious to see how this experiment plays out. (Someone could probably write a thesis on either psychology or economics by studying the results.) Our specific plan is to add just one queue at first

and then to watch and see how popular it is. So there will be two different *Onslaught*-block booster draft queues (one paying out 8-4 and the other paying out 4-3-2-2). For all the other formats (Constructed, Rochester draft, *Seventh Edition* Booster Draft, and *Odyssey* block Booster Draft), there will still be just one queue, which will still pay out 8-4.

No matter how this experiment turns out, by the way, we have no intention to lower all 8-person queues down to 11 booster packs of total prizes. We believe there should always be 12-pack queues available and we're adding the new queue just to provide an additional option, not to replace anything.

Making Anonymity Easier

It can actually be pretty annoying to be a famous player on *Magic Online* because so many people are interested in talking to you. Most of the Pros will therefore camouflage themselves by changing to new accounts and keeping their account names secret from as many people as possible for as long as possible. One of the funniest stories to come out of the *Magic* Invitational last fall was that Jon Finkel "outed" Kai Budde by announcing in a public chatroom that "Flower is Kai Budde." Kai was logged into his "Flower" account at the time and watched in horror as his entire screen was immediately covered with dozens of private chat windows.

Another unfortunate—and more problematic--side effect of being well-known is that some players will flee a tournament queue when you sign up. Then they'll wait either for the good player to get into a tournament without them or for the good player to leave the queue, and then they'll rejoin the queue. This is kind of a silly dance in the first place, and some players have been forced to adopt some strange tactics just to get an opportunity to game. One commonly used tactic is to play on an account with an unknown name and a rating that has been deliberately suppressed. The idea here is that if you're camouflaged and your rating is low, then people will be willing to play against you. Well, we would like *Magic Online* ratings to be more meaningful so we're particularly unhappy if *low* ratings are coveted.

Because of these two factors we're going to change a couple of things in an upcoming update. We're going to make *all queues anonymous*. You will be able to see how many people are waiting in the queue along with you, but you will not be able to see who they are. We're also going to give everyone the option to set their account up such that they can only receive chat requests, game challenges, and trade offers from players who are on their buddy list. These changes should be ready to implement in the April update; so slightly over a month from now.

We believe that the combination of these two changes will remove all the incentives that currently cause players to keep their identity hidden and/or constantly changing. We also think it will remove any incentives for players to deliberately tank their ratings and thus it will make *Magic Online's* rating system more meaningful. That segues nicely into the third piece of our tournament improvements package...

1800-Floor Room

Many good players prefer to play against other good players because they would rather have the challenge and camaraderie that comes from playing against a peer than the easy win they usually get when matched up against "scrubs." This is especially true for people practicing for major events. But at the same time, just about everyone thinks winning is more fun than losing so new and casual players usually don't enjoy getting matched up against Pros either.

Our solution is to provide a place within *Magic Online* for the best players to congregate. We're going to add a new room that will be inaccessible unless you have a sufficiently high rating. That way the cream of the MTGO crop will both have a place they can always find a good game and also be nicely segregated into a room where they can beat each other up rather than beating on anyone else.

We're still working out the details and we don't expect this to be ready until May at the earliest, but our current tentative plan is to require players to get an 1800-rating in order to earn the right to enter our equivalent of a "frequent flier lounge." Players will lose their entrance privileges to the 1800-Floor room if their rating dips back below 1750. The room will include both sanctioned and unsanctioned play in both Limited and Constructed, along with the ability to chat exclusively with the other players who are in the room. My guess is that team booster draft will be a particularly popular format in this room. (For anyone who didn't notice its inclusion in the last update: 3-on-3 team booster draft has been coded and is now available for casual play.) These numbers could change between now and then, and we'll announce more details as we decide them, but I hope this paragraph has given you the gist of what we're planning.

Summary

So that's our plan for tournament system enhancements during the next several months. We think it has a little something for everyone. Casual players gets their own booster draft queue plus they run into 1800+ rated players less often in all public tournaments. Highly-rated players no longer have to disguise their identity plus they get a special room where they can always find a challenging opponent. Players in between get to sample both environments depending on their mood and recent accomplishments. (Meanwhile, players who aren't interested in tournaments at all have been given three new formats for casual play over the last several months.)

In addition to these changes there are some really cool special events being planned as well, but that is a subject for another time. Suffice it to say that next week's [Legions Release event](#) is just the tip of the iceberg.

LAST WEEK'S POLL

I know there are a lot of people who wanted more options in this poll, but I was afraid that would make the results much harder to interpret and wouldn't speak as directly to the issue I was talking about last week. Anyway, acknowledging that this was only a very rough "sanity check," R&D seems to have passed.

Randy may be reached at latestdevelopments@wizards.com.

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Have there been a reasonable number of powerful and/or innovative cards published in the last three years? Yes 5215 74.4% No 1799 25.6% Total 7014 100.0%

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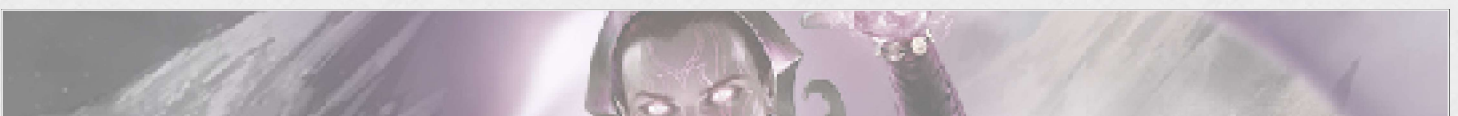
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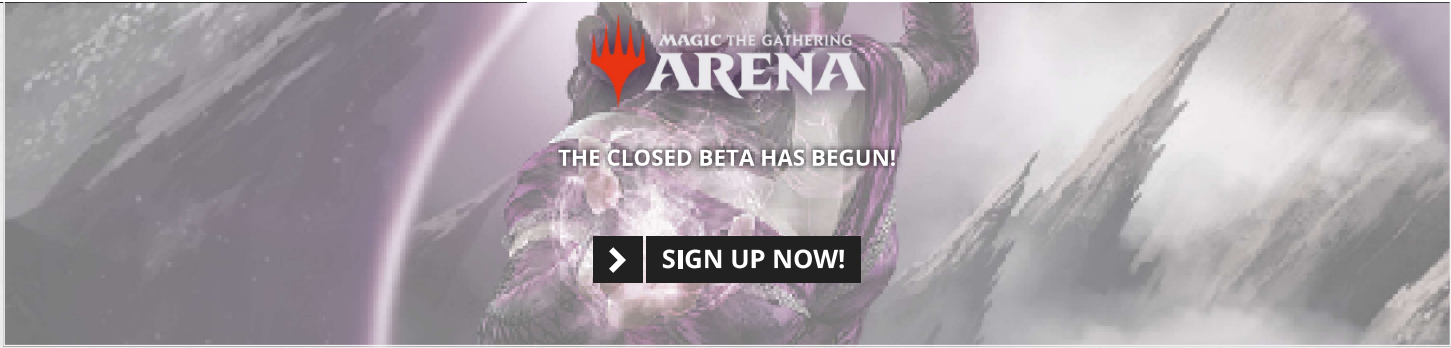
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