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# Taking Action

## New tools to deal with cheating



Daniel Myers · Inside Magic Online  
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I'd like to begin by thanking everyone for their positive feedback about [my column last week](#). In that article, I promised information on two subjects this week: cheating in league play and possibly the most difficult-to-code card yet in *Magic Online*. Well, it seems I've got a lot to talk about on the cheating topic, so I'll put off the card this week. (It'll also give Alan more time to decide if it's worse than *Zur's Weirding*.)

First, a couple of quick notes:

- Things are still looking good for the March 1 online release of *Darksteel* cards. Unless someone comes across a game-breaker at this point (doubtful), there won't be any date changes for release or events.
- I don't have anything specific about progress on the master server code and the **Premier Events** room. However, there's reason to believe we'll have some exciting news on that front sometime after the *Darksteel* launch.



## Cleanup Step

While the dev team is focused on fixing the nuts and bolts of *Magic Online*, the rest of us are doing our own housecleaning. There are things all of us on the *Magic Online* Team could do better for the game and the community, and now is the time to work on them.

Whether or not cheating in leagues is as rampant and widespread as some threads express, it's definitely a hot topic in the *Magic Online* community. The number one way players cheat in leagues is through bribery. One player offers a cut of the prizes, some event tickets, or other online product in return for the other player conceding from the match.

I, for one, don't understand why anyone would do this. No, I'm not so naive as to think everyone is in it for the game and that we all like a well-played game as much as we enjoy winning prizes. I'm not even going to attempt to appeal to people's morals and convince them it's the wrong thing to do. It just seems an awful risky proposition on both sides.

First, there's no way to ensure the briber coughs up the product. Once he or she gets you to concede, you're no longer necessary. As some players have mentioned, you're more likely to end up on the briber's blocked list than receive product.

Second, as the person being bribed, why on earth would you concede after you get the product? Now that you got some free stuff, just keep playing and see if you could win more. What's the briber going to do? Report you? I don't think so.

Third, and most importantly, if you get caught on *either* side of a bribe, you put your account in jeopardy. The current escalation process is short. On your first infraction, you could be suspended. On the next, you might lose your entire account. Do we do this often? No. Is the burden of proof heavy? Yes. Are the penalties strict? Very. Has the community seen much evidence of cheaters being penalized? No.

We know some adjustments are necessary to make leagues and other events fun for everyone. Let's take a look at the way things are and what is going to change.

## Handslap Or Beatstick?

Until recently, after a warning, our first level of punishing cheaters is a sledgehammer: 30-day suspension (sometimes longer). Now, many of you are saying "But one month is nothing compared to the penalties the DCI hands out!" True. However, the DCI doesn't have the ability to keep you from going to your local store, buying boosters, and playing **Magic** at your kitchen table.

In *Magic Online*, that's what a suspension means. It's more akin to being grounded from **Magic** than being penalized by the DCI. No buying. No playing. No trading. The only thing you can do is look at the cards in your collection.

What happens after that if there are continued problems? We shut down the account. That's right. The current steps are warning, suspension, banning. Three strikes and you're out—along with all the cards in the account.

When players find out about this, they usually respond in one of two ways. First, they wonder why the community never gets notice of this happening. There are a lot of little reasons for this, although some of us would like to put heads on pikes at the front gate. Mainly, though, publicizing an account's infractions labels a player not only in the tournament scene, as in a DCI penalty, but in casual play as well. We'd prefer someone that screws up be given a chance to come back and play nice. That's unlikely to happen if everyone knows the account has been busted for improper conduct.

The second response tends toward paranoia. "So if some Adept has it in for me I can lose my account just like that?!" No. Not the case. The *Magic Online* Community Manager reviews every situation and he's the *only* one with the authority to ban an account. Not only that, but any player who feels he or she has been penalized unfairly is allowed to appeal directly by emailing [magicconduct@wizards.com](mailto:magicconduct@wizards.com). If you state your case well and don't waste your appeal flaming Wizards, the community, the universe, etc., you'll get a fair hearing.

While we do hear a lot about us not taking action against players that violate the Code of Conduct, that's not the case. As some of you have noted, certain suspect accounts disappear from the game occasionally. When we have enough proof to penalize an account, we do so. But, given the tools we have to punish players for misbehavior, we want to be absolutely sure of the circumstances before doing so.

## The Burden Of Proof

Just like paper-based tournaments, there needs to be a certain level of proof before we will take action. Calling over a judge and falsely saying your opponent just tried to bribe you won't fly in paper **Magic**, and it won't in *Magic Online*, either. Likewise, if you watch a game and, after a long pause, one person concedes even though that player's ahead, that isn't proof of bribery. Sure, it looks suspicious, but it's not *proof*. For all you know, one person had to drop anyway and just wanted to get some games in.

Because the escalation process is so steep, we require substantial proof of an infraction. What is substantial proof? Well, that depends on the situation. In general, at least get a screenshot and the game number. Without those items, there's basically nothing we can do.

Why don't we get more specific about what it takes to get a player penalized? The folks who attempt to bribe and otherwise cheat other players in *Magic Online* aren't stupid. The more they know about what it takes to get busted, the closer they'll skirt the line without crossing it. Let's just say we want to keep it fuzzy enough to make it possible for us to take action against obvious problem accounts. While we are careful about handing out penalties, doing so is completely up to our discretion.

## Disqualification

Now we come to the newly reinstated tool you've seen being tested recently: disqualification. Some of you also mentioned seeing this in beta, but it seemed to disappear after launch. As I'm sure some of you will agree, since launch we've focused more on code than community. In the hectic early days of figuring out how both the *Magic Online* game and community were going to develop, we forgot about some of the functionality we'd put in. Among those items was the disqualification tool.

Because the dev team is only focused on stability, Premier Events, and the next version, members of the *Magic Online* Team have to find better ways to do our jobs without new code. This also leads to reinvestigating old paths and ideas that have gone by the wayside in the past year-and-a-half. Rediscovering the disqualification command (and testing it to make sure it still works) is, I think, going to be a big step towards fixing the bribery issue.

The command does a lot of the things the community's been asking for since launch. As many of you have seen, it slaps a big \*DISQUALIFIED\* next to the player's name. While it won't tell you *why* a player was DQ'ed, you'll know when it happens.

What exactly happens to a disqualified player? Basically, the player is kicked out of the tournament or league. Which means a DQ'ed player receives no prizes—including any special giveaways for the event. So, if someone gets disqualified from one of the upcoming *Darksteel* Release Leagues, he or she won't get any packs or either of the avatars.

On the policy side, if a player is disqualified from one event for any reason, that player will be disqualified from any other events he or she is currently participating in. And, in the case of *Darksteel* Release Leagues, won't be allowed to compete in any of the other release leagues. If the disqualification is due to bribery (offering or accepting), the players will also receive a 30-day suspension.

So, what is it about the disqualification tool that'll make such a big change? It's because it gives us a smaller hammer to use than suspension. Disqualification allows us to prevent a player from competing in organized events while allowing him or her to continue to play casually. Because this tool doesn't affect the account in general, it allows us to use it more frequently.

Of course, if a player is disqualified for bribery or other violations of the Code of Conduct, the account is likely to be suspended, also.

## Conclusion

Will we catch everyone cheating in league play? Of course not. They don't catch everyone in paper *Magic* events, either. Are we sure this will make a huge difference in league behavior? Well, we think it's worth trying. I wouldn't be surprised to see a lot of DQ's during the *Darksteel* Release Leagues—we're likely to be somewhat heavy-handed with the disqualification tool initially. Given the concern many players have expressed about league behavior, we think you'd rather have us hitting the issue hard and adjust as necessary later.



Next week, I should be able to get to the problem child of the *Darksteel* set. I'm also hoping to have a bit more about the communication policy I'm working on and maybe something about what's being tested on the beta server *after* the *Darksteel* release.

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