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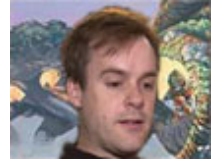
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# Multiplayer Madness



## Are you missing out?

Chad Ellis · Online and Enjoying It  
Tuesday, May 25, 2004

Before I get started with the main article, I want to clear up some things from [last week](#). A look at the forums shows that a lot of people misunderstood some things I said and that there is some confusion about what this whole column is for. So here goes:

1. I am not an employee of Wizards of the Coast. I'm not here to put forward some corporate line, or to be MTGO's apologist, and I'm certainly not going to say anything I don't believe.
2. I like to write in a tongue-in-cheek style. This means I will sometimes say things like, "**Magic Online** has no problems," or "there is no **Magic** scene in Germany." For this first article my tone may not have come through as I intended, at least for some of the readers. If I give a plausible opinion on something, like that **Shatter** is a better draft card than Bosh (which it is) and you disagree, go right ahead and tell me why you think I'm wrong. But if I say there is no **Magic** scene in Germany, which is roughly equivalent to saying there is no salt water in the Pacific Ocean, please at least consider that someone who has been on the Pro Tour for over a year might have been joking.
3. The acronym MODO: This is my fault...well, mine and Scott's. :) Two days before my first deadline, I got hit with the Sasser virus. Instead of spending those days checking the article (and adding some stuff I wanted in the introduction) I spent entirely too much time on the phone with the respective help desks of Microsoft and my mother-in-law's ISP. Meanwhile, Scott was out of the office covering the **Magic** Invitational and Pro Tour San Diego when my article arrived so we weren't able to discuss it and he wasn't able to catch things like outdated acronyms.
4. Finally, there's the point of this column. I'm writing exclusively about *playing **Magic Online***, and giving you interesting behind-the-scenes stories about how it came to be. I should not be considered a significant or official source in any way for information on the technical state of the game itself, as opposed to the previous column by Dan Myers. That is now being done in the forums by Justin Ziran, **Magic Online's** Brand Manager. From time to time I may mention improvements as they affect the playing experience, but if you're looking for updates specifically on technical details involving **Magic Online**, Justin's your source.

Basically, MODO is what it was called when I learned it and most of my friends still call it that. I was out of date. Remember, I'm old. MTGO from now on.

Instead, this column is a bit of "all things to all people", from a player's perspective. I'm going to be writing about drafting, multiplayer, major sanctioned events, buying/selling/trading cards, tips on getting the most out of the interface and pretty much anything else that is important to MTGO. A lot of it I'll be learning about as I write, so if you think I've left something out, email me about it or bring it up in the forums, so I can keep doing a better job as we go along.

Okay, on with the show.

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Recently I sat at a virtual table, watching a casual 3-on-3 match. One player was playing an Elf/Beast deck, with **Wirewood Savage** to keep the cards coming. Another was putting equipment on his **Loxodon Punisher**. Another returned **Gempalm Polluter** to his hand by casting **Gravedigger**. It was like the multiplayer games of my **Magic** youth (by **Magic** standards I was old

even then); the decks weren't great and the play wasn't perfect, but the spirit and fun were amazing and that was the point.

Later I watched two teams going at it in a game of Emperor. It was a more serious game, and the decks were clearly built with the format in mind. There were more copies of **Howling Mine**, **Wild Growth** and **Vernal Bloom** in play than I think I own in my offline collection. The game finally ended when one team's center player put roughly one million mana into his pool, cast **Death Wish** for **Weird Harvest**, cast it for fifteen, then cast **Burning Wish** for **Laquatus's Creativity**, cast the Creativity on his teammate, causing him to draw sixteen cards and discard sixteen creatures.

The center player then played **Twilight's Call**, bringing those discarded creatures back, and then cleared the soon-to-be attacked opponent's board with **Tsabo's Decree**, which he may also have Wished for! Finally he used the remaining mana in his pool to bring out a **Platinum Angel** and cast **Stream of Life** to put himself for seventeen, if memory serves.

That was a rather large turn...and there was only one turn after it, as his teammate took care of the formality of the combat phase.

Welcome to MTGO's casual multiplayer room. A land where Two-Headed Giant, Emperor and Prismatic matches can be found any time of day or night. If you're new to this area but thinking about trying it out, here's what some of its regulars had to say.



"Watch first," before jumping in to multiplayer games, says Neo (NeoNetGen on MTGO). Neo is the captain of a 50-person clan which has its own website with active discussion boards. "The game is different than with paper cards. It's faster, it's better organized and there's a wider variety of players with different skill levels. It's not like playing in your local card shop with the same people week after week." Susan (ORCuddler) agrees. "More people have lots of cards online than IRL, so there are more good multiplayer decks." Susan has been playing **Magic** since Beta, but now plays mostly online and mostly casual. The cost of sanctioned events keeps her from playing more, but she's found a solution for expensive cards. "One of my favorite cards in multiplayer is **Blatant Thievery**. I play a lot of Thievery decks online; it allows me to play with cards I can't afford!" Susan likes the greater variety of decks and combos she sees in the multiplayer rooms.

ISITTURBO is a casual MTGO fanatic, but he has his complaints, too. "The best thing about online is getting to play so many different opponents, but I hate it when people just leave a game on (e.g. won't concede) when they're losing or who quit in multiplayer. My blocked list isn't big enough to hold all of them." Asked what he'd change about MTGO, he replied, "Bigger blocked lists. :)"

Pierre DuPont (Mr\_Davies\_Lackey) and I almost ended up playing offline. I did these interviews from my father-in-law's house just outside of Ottawa, which put us in driving range of each other. However, instead of having **Magic** cards with me I've got a two-month-old baby, so it was not to be.

Pierre voiced a common theme when he described his favorite thing about MTGO: you can always find a game. "I work from home so I set my own schedule and it's great being able to start a game at any time." His favorite format is Prismatic, in which players run 250-card decks with a minimum of twenty spells of each color. "**Battle of Wits** is banned," he explained, "and people frown on landkill cards like **Sundering Titan**." He likes Prismatic because it leads to longer, more strategic games.

The people I talked to also identified the community itself as one of the best things about casual MTGO. Many have made friends they play with regularly and they enjoy the spirit of competition in the room. In addition to Neo's clan, ISITTURBO has made lots of friends through MTGO, many of which he plays with on a daily or near-daily basis. Players are also pretty good about specifying cards or decks that, while legal for the format, they don't want to play against. Games are often advertised with "no counterspells" or "no land destruction." No counters? :( Some of my fondest memories are of countering Randy Buehler's spells in the first Multiplayer Invitational. Fortunately for me, not all games forbid permission...

## Behind the Scenes: Some insights from Alan Comer



Alan Comer, PT  
Barcelona '01

Alan Comer is one of my favorite **Magic** players. I first met him at Your Move Games, long before I was even vaguely good at **Magic**. Alan was some newbie at the store (as far as I knew) but he was talking with Darwin Kastle, Rob Dougherty and Dave Humpherys like he was some Pro or something. I'm pretty sure he was explaining why **Elephant Grass** was a good card.

Later, of course, I learned that Alan was a pro...and one of the better ones, at that. My best PT result was 8th at Barcelona. Alan's best was also Barcelona...but he came in second. I've occasionally developed meaningful tweaks to existing decks, like putting **Rishadan Pawnshop** into Cowardice to win the mirror. Alan invents completely new decks. OK, we all invent new decks, but Alan's decks are called things like Miracle Grow and ComerZilla and dominate constructed formats for months at a time.

And now Alan is a Senior Software Developer for WotC, which means I get to ask him behind-the-scenes stuff about MTGO. We'll start with something new, then look at something a bit older, and finally start a big fight in the forums. :)

The "new" is Alan's biggest headache from *Fifth Dawn*:

At first glance, it's not obvious why this would be so tricky. Sure, there are five potential targets, and for each one you might choose not to target anything, but how hard is that? Let's see.

"It was mostly a ton of little stuff," explained Alan. The first is that MTGO's base code only supported spells with up to four different types of targets. So a spell that said pick target land, target player, target artifact and target card in your graveyard was OK, but if you also wanted it to pick target spell you were pushing past the original boundaries. This required two different code fixes."

The next problem came from the option not to pick a target for a color. There are other **Magic** cards with optional target choices, but none on MTGO with more than one optional target choice. MTGO cards with optional targeting are coded with the optional choice last, but in this case there are five so that couldn't be done. The basic problem is that the computer was convinced that once you'd decided not to target something you must be done with your targeting choices.

"So I coded it and tried to cast it," Alan explains. "The first time, I put cards of each color into the graveyard, and tried to get them all back. It never allowed me to get a green card back (The 5th color). Once I fixed that, it allowed me to target the Green card but not get it back."

The next problem came from the way the computer checked target legality on resolution. The targeting order is W, U, B, R, G. If you only targeted a white and a black card, the computer would consider the black target illegal on resolution because at that point it's assuming that the second target has to be blue.

"So I had to make the game server redo the check it had done for the client, calculating out what information it had sent the client to figure out what the client thought it was telling it."



MTGO players will already be familiar with another problem card, one that Alan says probably gave him the most headaches.

## Zur's Weiriding



The first part was easy; MTGO was already programmed to have players' hands revealed. But the real power of the card was a bit trickier.

"It was the first replacement effect I'd programmed," Alan explained. At first it looked like it had gone perfectly. On Alan's first pass, he paid two life, the card was discarded, no problem. The problem came when he didn't want to pay the two life. If no one pays, you draw the card...but the computer said, "Hang on, if someone draws a card I'm supposed to ask them if they want to pay two life instead..."

An infinite loop was created that would continue until someone paid two life.

So he got it working...or did he? "The day before the release of *8th Edition*, someone noticed that one of the **Merfolk Looter** type guys was wacky with it." Instead of drawing the card first, you would discard first and then be prompted to pay life or draw. The team quickly found

other "draw and discard" effects with the same bug, but not all of them were.

"What was going on, was some cards were programmed as draw, then discard as a single action, never coming up for breath between the draw and the discard. Thus, the game server could not handle the replacement correctly." Alan had to change all the "buggy" cards to the normal method. "Not something you want to be doing less than 24 hours before your release."

And that is the story of Zur and MTGO. Now for the fight.

Ask people what works and what doesn't work on MTGO and before long you're going to hear complaints about the shuffler. According to some, it's the biggest problem MTGO has. According to others, that's complete bunk. Personally, I've always been skeptical of this "problem" with the shuffler. I've drafted a couple hundred times online with decks from one to five colors and my draws seem the same as offline. But what do I know? So I decided to ask Alan.

"It is random. When Leaping Lizard originally tested if it wasn't random they did plots of its results, spending quite a bit of time trying to prove it was failing. However, all of their data fell within expected range for randomness, and with all their attempts to prove that it was failing, they came to the conclusion that it was their opinion of what was random that was at fault."

Alan and I discussed the perception that there is a problem, and we came to a pretty similar conclusion. "One of the hard parts about randomness is that somebody is going to get really screwed every so often," Alan explained. It's a basic phenomenon of probability, known generally as the bell curve of distribution. Take a large group of people, especially with a relatively small sample size of games, and some of them are going to be on either end of the curve. That is, some will have amazing draws and some will have awful ones. Throw in a phenomenon of human nature -- our tendency to remember bad draws more than good ones -- and you have what I believe is an illusion of poor shuffling. If you want to make the case that the shuffler really IS bad, or you've got any other feedback on this article or the column in general, take it to the forums. I'll see you there!

***One of the hard parts about randomness is that somebody is going to get really screwed every so often.***

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