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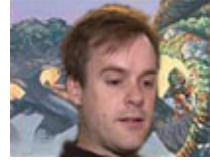
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# Tailoring to Suit

## Interface tips



Chad Ellis · Online and Enjoying It  
Tuesday, June 15, 2004

*“Me: 8 life, Opponent: 20. He has 2 **Ravenous Baloths** on the board. I have pretty much the gauntlet running, but no **Wrath of God**. My solution to the Baloths wandering over to kill me? During his upkeep, I did 26 points of damage to his head by giving up 13 draws to the **Words of War**, forcing him to sac a Baloth.”*

hanging out with Alan Comer is good times, even if it's over a chat messenger. Who else is likely to come up with a deck that draws thirteen cards during his opponent's upkeep, let alone being able to give up those draws in order to do twenty-six points to the dome?

Before you get too excited, the deck has two problems. I'll give you the list and see if you can guess what they are. (Don't try too hard – it's a trick question and I don't want anyone getting frustrated because they think it's some sort of Magic the Puzzling question!)

**Words** Hdec

60 cards

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2 Forest</li> <li>1 Mountain</li> <li>4 Plains</li> <li>4 City of Brass</li> <li>4 Grand Coliseum</li> <li>4 Urza's Mine</li> <li>4 Urza's Power Plant</li> <li>4 Urza's Tower</li> </ul> <p>27 land</p>	<p>0 creatures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2 Chromatic Sphere</li> <li>4 Howling Mine</li> <li>4 Mind's Eye</li> <li>4 Teferi's Puzzle Box</li> <li>1 Words of War</li> <li>1 Words of Wind</li> <li>1 Words of Worship</li> <li>2 Naturalize</li> <li>4 Razor Barrier</li> <li>4 Pyroclasm</li> <li>2 Reminisce</li> <li>4 Wrath of God</li> </ul> <p>33 other spells</p>
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What a cool deck. **Teferi's Puzzle Box** has always been one of my favorite rares. Breaking symmetrical cards is always tricky, and unfortunately the Puzzle Box is particularly tricky because your opponent gets a new hand first. That, in turn, means that if she's already got a **Shatter** or **Disenchant** she'll kill the Box (possibly waiting until its ability is on the stack if her hand is bad) and if she doesn't you're giving her a new hand of cards to try to find one.

Alan breaks the symmetry very nicely here with **Mind's Eye** and lands that produce lots of mana. Now the

Puzzle Box doesn't just help both players zoom through their decks – it gives Alan an insane number of draws and lets him gain insane amounts of life with **Words of Worship**, blow his opponent up with **Words of War**, or reset the board with **Words of Wind**. “Tournament staples” like **Reminisce** and **Razor Barrier** protect his key permanents and let him keep playing **Wrath of God** if necessary.

So what are the problems? Well, the first is that the deck isn't quite as good as it was when Alan first made it. “This deck was created for the Future Future League like the first or second week I was here at WotC,” Alan recalls. “Back then, **Mind's Eye** didn't cost 1 to activate. This deck changed that.”

Anyone else out there think they would have shown that **Mind's Eye** was potentially degenerate in constructed play if you didn't have to pay one mana for each draw? Not me, and certainly not with something like this.



The other problem is that the deck has roughly one million triggers during a game. If you're playing it in person you can handle them in batches, but on **Magic Online** if you have **Words of War**, **Words of Worship** and Puzzle Box in play with five cards in your hand you're going to have to make twelve separate yes/no decisions on whether to draw a card, gain life or **Shock** something. And your opponent may want or have to respond to some of those choices as well.

Which leads us into today's column on how to tailor MTGO to suit your preferences and reduce the danger of game losses due to interface.

If you've played enough on MTGO, the odds are good that you've both won and lost games for reasons having to do with the interface rather than the game itself. The three most common, in my experience, seem to be misclicks, losing on time because of having to click OK in response to too many things, and not being able to take some action because you don't have a “stop” in play at the right moment.

There's not much I can do to help you with misclicks (although at least some can be taken back, as we'll see below). But the others can be greatly helped.

First, a brief flashback. Many years ago, back when The Dojo was by far the most important **Magic** website, Tom Guevin wrote an article calling for chess clocks to be brought into competitive **Magic**. His case was simple – a player should not be at a disadvantage because his opponent plays more slowly than he does. Putting aside the whole problem of deliberate stalling, **Magic** rounds often end before three games are completed and it stinks when you have board advantage and are playing fast and your opponent runs out the clock without doing anything so slowly that you can get a judge to do anything about it. (Never mind that not even Pro Tours have enough judges to watch every match, so sometimes you simply can't get a judge to sit at your table and either give a warning or award extra time.)

Before playing **Magic** I was a tournament chess player, so in principle I agreed with Tom. In practice, however, I knew it couldn't work. Chess is a game with very clear turn protocol and very simply physical moves. In **Magic** both players have to act during a turn and actions often involve several cards. Time scrambles in chess often get ugly, and sometimes a piece gets put down on the wrong square. Can you imagine a time scramble in **Magic**?

But even before the scramble would be death by one million passings of priority. “I enter my upkeep and pass.” Hit the clock. “Pass back,” hit the clock. “Draw for my turn, pass,” hit. “Pass back.” Most players might not bother with this, but you know some out there sure would.

MTGO, of course, solves that problem for the most part. There's no physical clock to hit and the interface keeps lands from getting messed up when you try to cast **Fangren Hunter** as fast as possible, and players can say when they want to have a chance to do something. But there are tradeoffs.

In physical **Magic** you can say, “End of turn, Tim you,” and virtually no time is lost. On MTGO you have to click your Tim...and in the current block you have to click a Red mana source as well. Then your opponent has to specify that he isn't responding (rather than in offline **Magic** where that's more or less the default assumption).

And sometimes it gets awful. When you're short on time in a match your opponent may start doing random things just to force you to respond to them and lose a second or two. In a recent match I watched with chagrin as my opponent pumped his tapped **Hematite Golem** during my EOT step just because I was down to less than three minutes and he had six or seven. Even worse, I've spoken with people who have lost matches because they fell behind on time and their opponent repeatedly used **Seeker of Skybreak** to untap itself – no game effect whatsoever, but each activation demanded a response.

The other side to the problem is that unless your settings are set to “stop” at a point in your opponent's turn, they won't. At various times I've been unable to play **Needlebug** or **Raise the Alarm** during the “declare attackers step” and thus been unable to block. For reasons passing understanding I've sometimes found myself without a block in the “beginning of attack” step when I'd like to tap down an attacker with my **Icy Manipulator**.

Other things are just impossible to do if you don't know how to tell MTGO what you're trying to do. Suppose you've got **Thoughtcast** in hand and in play you've got **Chromatic Sphere**, two Mountains and a **Tree of Tales**. You're allowed to put **Thoughtcast** on the stack, locking in its converted mana cost at 2, then sacrifice **Chromatic Sphere** for 1 in order to be able to cast it. But if you sac the sphere before announcing **Thoughtcast** it will only see one artifact in play and cost 3.

Usually you want to cast a spell and then yield...but not always. If you don't know how to tell the computer you're not yielding priority, you can't do it.

With all that in mind, the following are some ideas to help out in this area. What follows is by no means exhaustive, but it covers what I believe are the most important tips for getting the most out of the interface.



The first place to start is with the “game play” tab on your settings. On the left is a column showing where you have stops set up. This is where you will always get a chance to act even if your opponent doesn't do anything. Anywhere you don't have a stop there's a risk that you won't get a chance to act when you'd like to. On the other hand, stops that you don't use slow the game down and can cost you clock time.


My default settings are both main phases and declare blockers for my turn and beginning of combat, declare attackers, declare blockers and end of turn for my opponent's turn. That handles the great majority of when I want to do things and the time I save by keeping the others free more than makes up for the risk that I'll forget to add a stop temporarily if I want to do something else (e.g. tapping a land during my opponent's upkeep).

On the right side of the page are some basic settings. "Prompt before mana burn is a good safety to have checked." You can uncheck it if you're deliberately burning yourself in order to kill someone with Pulse of the Forge, but it will also protect you from accidentally clicking "OK" while casting a spell and burning for four rather than casting it! Yield to all combat damage is best left unchecked for most players. The best time for combat tricks is often after damage is on the stack. However, yielding to combat damage that doesn't affect you or your creatures is pretty safe as a default and means you don't have to click "OK" to continue after smashing your opponent's face.

Skip the rest of the attack step when there are no attackers is fairly safe, but not always. Suppose your opponent has out an **Iron Myr** and a **Vulshok Berserker** while you've got an **Icy Manipulator**, **Fangren Hunter** and **Aether Spellbomb** with only one Island untapped for land. He enters his attack step and waits to see if you'll tap anything down. You decide not to since your Hunter can handle his Berserker and you can bounce either the Berserker or the Hunter if he has any tricks. If he declares no attackers you might decide it's worth using your only mana to tap the **Iron Myr** before going back to his main phase.

This illustrates the need to put your basic settings at whatever makes the most sense to you but to keep individual situations in mind because they can and do come up.

The final option you can choose is, "You can only announce a spell or activated ability if you have the mana in your mana pool necessary to pay for it." This can be fairly convenient if you don't like counting artifacts every time you play an Affinity spell. If the option is clicked, only cards you're able to cast or activate will have their names lit up, and as you add mana to your pool you see exactly when you're able to cast a spell.

However, I'm a fan of leaving this box unchecked. It's good discipline and it's also the only way you can cast **Thoughtcast** off of a **Chromatic Sphere** before sacrificing the Sphere for .

Now let's look at some other aspects of handling the MTGO interface. Here are some of the more useful commands and actions you can take:

F4 = go to end of turn/only stopping for attack or to respond. If your turn is basically "land/go" this will save you a few clicks and hopefully a few seconds.

Holding down the Ctrl key while clicking a spell lets you keep priority, in case you want to put more than one thing on the stack before letting your opponent respond.

Alt-U is undo...good for untapping lands when you've misclicked or changed your mind about something.

If a permanent's activated or triggered ability is going to come up a lot (and you are sure you don't want to respond to it) right-click on the ability when you're asked if you want to respond. You'll be given the option to yield to all instances of that ability for the rest of the turn or for the rest of the game. This can save you a lot of time and boredom if your opponent has **Sun Droplet** in play! It will also prevent someone from cheesing you out with **Seeker of Skybreak**.

There are countless other tips for getting the most out of the MTGO interface. Please bring yours to the forums to share with the rest of us. I'll see you there!

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