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On Again Off Again

Using MTGO for tourney preparation.



Chad Ellis · Online and Enjoying It Tuesday, June 29, 2004

The other day I spoke with Rob Dougherty about preparing for the upcoming MD5 block constructed PTQ season. One very nice side effect of writing this column is that Wizards of the Coast provided me with a “super” account with four of every card. (No, I'm not allowed to trade with it, so don't ask!) While I'm not able to enter any events with prizes as OnlineAndEnjoyingIt, I'm able to make all sorts of whacky casual or multiplayer decks as I explore the MTGO community. And, of course, I'll be able to make block constructed decks as soon as *Fifth Dawn* goes live.

Rob has to get his cards the hard way, but he's very enthusiastic about MTGO as a testing tool, due both to the speed and simplicity of putting a new deck together and to the environment of players to test with. He went so far as to say that if MTGO released sets at the same time as they came out offline he could prepare for a Pro Tour without a team!

The advantages of MTGO are pretty obvious. But there are some serious pitfalls, too. If, like me, you plan to do a lot of your PTQ preparation on MTGO, you need to be aware of them.

The first and probably most serious danger is that MTGO can make you sloppy. We [recently](#) looked at how to get the most out of MTGO's interface while avoiding potential pitfalls. We've all lost games we never would have offline simply because there was a stop missing or we misclicked. But the same thing can happen in reverse.



Rob Dougherty, 2nd Place - PT Houston '02



Now it's up to you to remember.

MTGO tells you every time there's a triggered effect, and you have to take a decision on it. What this means in practical terms is that you don't have to pay any attention to your **Disciple of the Vault**. When an artifact goes to the graveyard, you'll be reminded to make your opponent lose a life. You can't forget to gain life off of **Sun Droplet**, or to draw a card with **Mind's Eye**.

In offline play, of course, these “may” triggers can pass without notice. And in the great majority of cases, if you go on to do something else (or allow your opponent to do so), the implicit assumption is that you **chose** not to make your opponent lose a life, not to gain life from **Sun Droplet** or not to risk decking yourself by drawing a card off of **Mind's Eye**. As silly as it may seem to think you might make these plays by anything other than oversight, that's what the result will be.

Even top players are vulnerable. Remember Rob? Access to drafts at any time of day or night as well as countless opponents to try constructed deck ideas on make MTGO a great help. But in the first round at Nationals Rob lost the deciding game because he forgot his **Disciple of the Vault** and gave his opponent a few precious points of life.

The bottom line, as the saying goes, is that your brain is like a muscle. If you don't use it, or even if you don't use it for a specific task, it gets weak, either in general or at the specific task.

Drafters are probably at greater risk than constructed players. Not only are there more “may” triggers in draft, but drafters face challenges caused by the difference between MTGO and offline drafting itself.

If you're drafting on MTGO, you can choose to see the cards you've drafted. MTGO will sort them by color or casting cost and you can hide chaff cards you know you're not going to run. This way you have an easy view of your deck as it develops – how your curve is going, how much removal you have, etc.

Compare that with the top 8 of a PTQ. During a set of packs *Paul Reitzl, NAC 2004 Champion* you're not allowed to look at your deck at all. I joked with Paul Reitzl in a recent Your Move Games draft, complaining that I used to know exactly what I'd drafted – card for card – and now I sometimes can't remember half of my cards. Now Paul is a rising star in **Magic**, but he said he has the same problem. Since we don't have to remember our draft picks on MTGO, we've gotten worse at doing it when we're drafting offline.

The solution seems simple – stop using the “cards” option! That's certainly a start. The problem is, you can't exactly simulate the offline draft experience on MTGO. When you draft offline, you have some time between packs to review. On MTGO as soon as the last person has picked the next set of packs opens. It could be that trying to do a whole draft without reviewing is like athletes training at high altitudes; just as my memory has gotten weaker, yours may get much stronger if you force yourself not to look at all.

I'm very cautious, however, of trying to solve the problem by creating another distorted (relative to offline) draft experience. The reason is that a big part of the problem many people have when they break into a higher level of competitive play comes simply from unfamiliarity.

Let's say you've been drafting at your local store and online and you've gotten pretty good. You finally combine a good sealed deck with careful play and win a spot in the top eight. If you're like most people, you will suddenly realize that this is a very different draft than you're used to.

First of all, you've probably got a crowd watching. A lot of people suddenly start second-guessing themselves when their friends are watching them play for big stakes. Then when you've taken your first pick you're supposed to count out the cards in rows of three or four for the player on your left. You can't pick up the next pack until you're told. None of these things should make a difference, but they do...especially if even opening a pack has become less familiar.

My advice is to make sure that no matter how much you practice on MTGO, make sure you get in enough practice under tournament conditions. If a limited season is coming up, talk to your store owner or judge about holding the drafts “top 8 style” rather than the more casual way most stores hold low K-value drafts. Get used to picking your card when a judge says, “Ready...draft.”

For this PTQ season, make sure you play constructed matches offline as well as on. And keep an eye out for problems that might arise from the differences between them. In particular, keep an eye out for those triggers...

And when *Fifth Dawn* goes live on MTGO, look for me in the “Casual Play, Serious Decks” area!

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