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Teaming Up

*Bennie Smith
Into the Aether
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Not long ago, Wizards rolled out a new-fangled take on the Two-Headed Giant format, recently culminating in Limited [2HG Champs](#) tournaments around the North America for paper **Magic**. We are also currently neck-deep in 3-man Team Constructed Pro Tour Charleston Qualifiers. This weekend's [Dissension prereleases](#) give paper **Magic** fans their first hands-on experience with the final *Ravnica* set. In addition to the prerelease flights of sealed deck, there will also be Team Limited and Two-Headed Giant Limited events run as well. As always, I'll be helping the Star City gang in [Richmond, Virginia's prerelease](#), so make sure to come by the administration table and say "hi!"

I would appear 'tis the season for teaming up with your buddies and slinging Magical cards, so I thought it would be a nice opportunity to turn the spotlight on the opportunities for Team play we have available on **Magic Online** in the Casual, Multiplayer room. Here are the team events available for play:

Two- and Three-Headed Giant

Number of players: 4 or 6
 Teams: Two 2- or 3-player teams.
 Life totals: Each team shares a life total. (40 for Two-Headed and 60 for Three-Headed.)
 Win condition: Reduce the opposing team's life total to 0.

In Two- and Three-Headed Giant games, each player is across from a player on the opposing team. Each player can attack the player across from him or her. Like basic multiplayer, your spells and abilities can affect any player in the game. One team wins when the opposing team's life total reaches 0.

It's important to keep in mind that on MTGO, Two-Headed Giant (2HG) is the "old-school" version and is distinct from the new "official" 2HG sanctioned by the DCI. While each team has a pooled life total, each player has their own distinct turn sequence just like a regular duel instead of shared turns. Also, unlike the new 2HG, creatures you play can only block creatures from or attack the player across from you.

A couple of notes for those who are unfamiliar with the format: each player will display the shared life total, and when one player takes damage, it is deducted from each total. Similarly, life gain for one player benefits both. Also, spells of abilities can target any player, so if your teammate is in trouble, your removal spells can be deployed to help him or her out. Remember too that global spells – like *Wrath of God* – affect everyone at the table.

Teams (2 vs. 2) or (3 vs. 3)

Number of players: 4 or 6
 Teams: Two 2- or 3-player teams.
 Life totals: Each player begins with 20 life.
 Win condition: Defeat all players on the opposing team.

In team multiplayer games, each player is across from a player on the opposing team. Each player can attack the player across from him or her. When the player across from you is defeated, you can attack the next closest opposing team member (going clockwise around the table). Like basic multiplayer, your spells and abilities can affect any player in the game. One team wins when all members of the opposing team have been defeated.

This format is a bit less popular than the X-Headed Giant format because if one member on the team falls quickly, the other player or players have to stick it out and try to take on the opposing team alone. Still, there are advantages to this format for those who are more comfortable with a more traditional multiplayer approach to team play (and possibly have issues with some cards like *Test of Endurance* being "broken" in X-Headed Giant).

Emperor (6 players)

Number of players: 6
 Teams: Two 3-player teams.

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RULES

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 Basic Rulebook
 Comprehensive Rules
 All Magic Rules

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NOVELS

Time Spiral
 Time Spiral Cycle, Book I
 by Scott McGough



Life totals: Each player begins with 20 life.
Win condition: Defeat the opposing team's Emperor.

Each team in an Emperor game consists of one Emperor in the middle and two Flankers, one on each side. Flankers can attack the opposing team's Flanker sitting across from him or her. Emperors can't attack anyone unless they lose one of their Flankers.

In Emperor, there's a one-player spell radius. This means a player's spells and abilities can only target players and permanents one seat to the right or left. So, at the beginning of an Emperor game, Emperors can only target their Flankers and their Flankers' permanents. Flankers can only target the Flanker across from them and their own team's Emperor (and those players' permanents).

Any spells or abilities that affect "all" of something affect all players in the game.

Once a Flanker eliminates the opposing Flanker, he or she can attack and target the opposing team's Emperor. That Emperor can also attack and target the opposing Flanker.

One team wins when the opposing team's Emperor is defeated.

When I was going over the various MTGO formats available, I was surprised to realize that I had not actually played a game of Emperor. Then I remembered—the “buzz” on the format that I had picked up from forum posts, emails, pm's, and articles I've read seemed to suggest a format that was difficult to get acclimated to, in addition to many of the format's fans being... a little less than patient with newcomers (to put it diplomatically). I decided before I researched too deeply into the format that I would build a deck with what I knew about Emperor off-hand:

1. You have an Emperor and two flankers on each team. The flankers can attack the flankers across from them, and the emperors can't be affected until one of his or her flankers is eliminated.
2. Emperors have time to set up degenerate stuff and also would do well to do what they can to boost their flankers and keep them in the game.

I'm sure Emperor aficionados are cringing already, but my goal was to emulate the typical newbie to the format by *being* a newbie. Hard-core emperor players may want to avert their eyes, but here's the deck I put together:

Emperor Auramancer by Bennie Smith (Extended)			dec	
60 cards				
4 Brushland	3 Auramancer	4 Armadillo Cloak		
4 Forest	4 Dowsing Shaman	2 Debtors' Knell		
3 Krosan Verge	1 Kitsune Mystic	3 Dragon Scales		
4 Plains	4 Verduran Enchantress	3 Elephant Guide		
4 Selesnya Sanctuary	1 Yavimaya Enchantress	4 Fertile Ground		
4 Temple Garden		2 Floating Shield		
	13 creatures	1 Mythic Proportions		
23 land		4 Unquestioned Authority		
		1 Wurmweaver Coil		
		24 other spells		

When I first lurked around the multiplayer casual room, I couldn't find an open Emperor game to jump into, so I fired up one of my own and waited. And waited. And waited. A couple people dropped in and dropped out, but I didn't come anywhere close to filling it up. A kind fellow pm'd me and suggested that I needed to do a better job advertising the format in my announcement—something like “emperor extended 1/1/1 gents rules.” The 1/1/1 indicates the range that players can use to target spells or abilities on the stack, maximum spell range, and the range of global effects (something you need to set up in under Options when you're initiating your game). I was told “gent's rules” went something like this: No Discard, Hand Destruction, Land Destruction, Direct Damage to player, **Time Stretch**, Theft, or Counters (from the [Foily Fanatics](#) website, which has some good advice on the Emperor format). So I did it again, tacking on “emperor newbie” and “[magicthegathering.com](#) writer” to see if I could stir some interest, but after 20 minutes, I still had no success.

While waiting for my game to fill, I noticed another emperor game announced and decided to go ahead and jump in there. Luckily, the actual emperor seat was available, so I could use my **Auramancer** deck! As the table started filling up, the player who initiated the game, exar kun1, started to panic as he realized his emperor – me – was not a “real” emperor. No **Weird Harvests**, no **New Frontiers**, no **Hunted Wumpus**. When I told him I was playing an Aura deck, you could almost hear his groan of despair. Strangely enough, when the table filled up there was only one other veteran Emperor player in the game, and while the two of them bemoaned their fate with much virtual gnashing of teeth, the rest of us basically responded “just shuffle up and play.” Let's get on with it!



This card is clearly against gentlemen's rules.

Apparently most "real" emperor games are akin to Vintage matches in paper **Magic**—short, brutal affairs chock full of degenerate effects. Seeing turn 4 is apparently a rarity. If that's the case, then I'm glad we didn't play a "real" emperor game, since I think most of us had a pretty good time. Sadly, my opponent lost one flanker early on when he dropped from the game unexpectedly. I can't help but wonder if my flanker *exar kun1* came to at least a grudging respect for my silly Aura strategy as his *Plated Sliver* was buffed by *Elephant Guide*, *Armadillo Cloak*, *Dragon Scales*, and *Unquestioned Authority* (and don't worry, I only loaded up on that one sliver when it was protected by regeneration by *Crypt Sliver*, and correctly guessing that his opponent was probably not playing *Boomerang* or *Repeal*).



For those interested in learning how to play "real" Emperor games, my predecessor Jay Moldenhauer-Salazar wrote a nice primer in [IntoTheAether Is Ready to Serve](#). Here are a few highlights:

1. Unlike "classic" Emperor in which spells have a two-player range and global spells are truly global, in online Emperor spells only have a one-player range. Seriously: Spells have a 1-player range. All spells. This means if you're an emperor that things like *Hunted Wumpus*, *Weird Harvest*, *New Frontiers*, *Howling Mine*, *Words of Wisdom*, *Mass Hysteria*, etc. are fantastic because they benefit your flankers (online Emperor calls lieutenants "flankers," which is something else you should know) and do absolutely nothing for your opponents. If you are a flanker, it's better to load up on ridiculous creatures to benefit from emperors who use such shenanigans. Mass creature removal like *Wrath of God* and *Starstorm* are almost completely absent in online Emperor because if you're an emperor you'll only kill your friends and if you're a flanker you will hurt your emperor. You need to completely rethink your normal card evaluations to play this format, even if you're used to typical [paper **Magic**] Emperor games.
2. Online Emperor has a strong subculture with its own etiquette and lingo. This is definitely a format with experts who are serious about their craft. People don't tolerate emperors who aren't there solely to help out their flankers or flankers whose decks aren't built to be true flankers. If you are a beginner to the format, like me, you need to advertise this fact and let other players decide if they want the job of showing you the ropes. "Watch and learn before you play. It's a whole new game, bub" one online player advised me after I utterly humiliated myself trying to join a pickup Emperor game.
3. Almost every single Emperor game I've seen uses the Online Extended card pool. Currently, that means everything from *Invasion* through *Fifth Dawn* is fair territory for deck building. If you want to play Emperor with a different cardpool like Standard, you are going to be waiting a long time for five other people to play.

You may also want to read [Emperor Imperatives](#) by Anthony Alongi; while he's talking about paper **Magic** Emperor, there is plenty of good stuff here for us MTGOers.

When looking into what had been written about Emperor on [magicthegathering.com](#) previously, I ran across [IntoTheAether Invites You](#) by JMS, where he follows up on the format after giving it a whirl. It's interesting how many of his concerns from nearly two years ago still seem to resonate today:

"A lot of people seem to truly dislike Online Emperor as it is currently played. There's a bunch of folks who like it--and these people like it a lot--but the majority of posts on the Message Boards and e-mail I received expressed strong negative feelings for an Emperor format in which all spells have a one-player range (called 1-1-1 online... more on this later) with its current "unspoken" banned list."

"The gripes about Online Extended, at least with the 1-1-1 format that dominates the Multiplayer room, seem to be (in no particular order):

- It's stagnant, since a small pool of cards is used by almost all players while a large pool of cards are actively kept out of the format by its participants. Moreover, there seems to not only be a "preferred" way to build decks, but a fairly "required" way.
- It's expensive, since this small pool of cards is predominantly rare, and rare-heavy decks are the only ones that thrive.
- It's unfriendly to newcomers, since the subculture of players actively boots out people who don't play by their rules.
- It's random, since games are most often decided by which emperor can "go off" combo-style to enable a single flanker to win in one fatal attack. Extremists go so far as to say that whichever team casts *New Frontiers* first wins.

"Proponents of the 1-1-1 Online Emperor format say that it speaks to the power gamer in us. What happens in each game is crazy, but in a good kind of way. It's a skill-intensive format that requires an enormous amount of teamwork to play correctly. It's comforting, they say, to have clearly prescribed rules and predictability in what you'll face. They argue that deck diversity does exist and that you can make a "budget" flanker deck using, for example, *Elves* or *Beasts*."

In the face of the negativity that surrounded the format, JMS turned things around by proposing Three Days of Emperor Fun. Jay proposed to shake up the format by changing the setting to 2/2/All for Emperor games on those days, and by his account (in [IntoTheAether Has No Clothes](#)) it was a smashing success! 2/2/All brings cards like *Weird Harvest* and *New Frontiers* back down to earth, so cutting down on the degeneracy makes things more fun for the average multiplayer fan.

Time has passed and the negativity appears to have gathered 'round the format once again. I can't help but think perhaps we might need another Emperor Fun casual event – nothing "official" with prizes, but rather just a time period we set up where those who are interested in trying a non-typical Emperor game or two can gather together for some fun! Let's do a nifty poll-thingie to see if enough of you are interested:

Would you be interested in playing 2/2/all Emperor during Days of Emperor Fun?

- Yes
 No

Submit my Vote

If you're thinking "Depends" click "yes," assuming that there will be times available to fit your schedule.

Before we leave this overview of team play on MTGO, I'd like to touch on a few more things. First, check out [Team Trials and Triumphs](#), another good article by Anthony Alongi regarding team play.

There's also something you might not know about: Once you've set up a new multiplayer game, you'll go to the Waiting for Players window until you have enough players to begin the game. Since you created the game, you have the ability to click and drag players (including yourself) from the seat they currently occupy to another seat. Your mouse pointer will turn into cross hairs to signify that you can move a player. While this may not matter much in a Free-For-All multiplayer game, for team play this may be important in getting everyone in the right seat. Just make sure you're nice about it!

Last, sometimes it becomes necessary to eject a player if they keep going away from the keyboard, losing their connection, or become just plain obnoxious. Players can vote to eject any other player from a Multiplayer Game by typing /eject name in the game's chat area. If the player's name has a space in it, put quotation marks around it (/eject "player name").

MTGO Community Virtual Road Show!

Back in the summer of 2004, Chad Ellis (who first started writing about *Magic Online* for [magicthegathering.com](#)) [proposed highlighting](#) some of the everyday MTGO players who go above and beyond the call of duty in their support or contributions to the *Magic Online* community:

"Community is what makes MTGO special. Sure, it's great knowing you can get a draft or a match at any point of day or night, but it's more than that. It's the friends we make, the whacky decks we find in casual multi-player, the Adepts and experienced players who take the time to answer questions or to hook new players up with some commons or uncommons for their deck.

"Communities are about people, but they are also about stories. Stories define a community and the connections of the people within it. Stories make a community come alive. And thus we begin this week's column with a request for your stories about people who have contributed to the MTGO community.

"Do you know someone who created an important user room for MTGO? Who helps new players with their decks? Who answers questions so that people get the most out of their time online? Has someone made your MTGO experience better by their generosity, their example, or their kindness? Then tell me. And it's not just being nice. Did someone create a defining deck for a casual format? Is there a trader who consistently impresses you with his or her fairness and good service? Communities are formed by all sorts of interactions, so what matters is that it's important to you."

The *Magic Online* community responded by sending in nominations by email and by forum posts, and [Chad picked some finalists for people to vote on](#) to receive a special *Magic Online* Community Award. In the end, apparently there were some shenanigans in both the nominating process and the voting that derailed the spirit of the contest and injected controversy into what should have been a celebration. Still, I think the idea has merit, and we should definitely take the time to celebrate those who do go that extra mile to make *Magic Online* more fun. So this time we're going to do something different. Instead of culling nominations into a vote-off, I'd like to do a "MTGO Community Virtual Road-Show" where just about every week I will devote space to spotlighting someone or something that positively contributes to the *Magic Online* Community. It may be a player-run event that I drop by and play in, or at least offer space for the rules, times, and a recap of a recent event. It may be an interview with someone who invests a bunch of their time in making something extra fun. I'm opening it up to you to decide—who's worthy of a stop on the Community Road Show? Drop me a nomination email or post in the forum of this article and I will start setting up an itinerary.

WizO Kwai Chang is still looking for Reporters!

A [few weeks back](#) I mentioned an email I got from WizO Kwai Chang and the [MTGO Events Calendar](#). This is a great resource for those who are interested in getting a brief overview of the rapidly changing MTGO metagame. JediStarkiller and Offkorn are doing a great job assisting, but they could use more help! If you are interested, [go to this thread here](#) and post. I imagine the MTGO Community Road Show may very well be making a stop here one week...

Bennie Smith has been playing Magic since Arabian Nights, and writing about it nearly as long. Several of his early musings appeared on the Magic Dojo, and from there he became a featured writer for Star City Games and a Contributing Editor for Scrye Magazine before he started writing for magicthegathering.com. While a casual gamer at heart, Bennie also thoroughly enjoys the competitive side of Magic and won the Virginia State Championship in 1999.



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