

***Magic: The Gathering* in material and virtual space: An ethnographic approach  
toward understanding players who dislike online play**

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It's seven P.M. on a Friday night in Brick, NJ. Cars race along the highway outside of Tommy's Card Shop. Every so often, a car meanders into the dirt parking lot out back. Footsteps and laughter emerge boisterously from the space in the alley, as a pair of *Magic: The Gathering* (M: TG) players walk by. To an outsider, their conversation is arcane, "blue-white fliers are great in this format," a cigarette is tossed on the ground as the door to Tommy's is opened. "Blinding Mage and Azure Drake are really easy to get a hold of . . ." The conversation ends abruptly, as the door seals behind them. They were talking about the weekly Friday Night Magic Draft that Tommy's Card Shop, and thousands of other game stores worldwide, host. Much like a sport, participating players compete to improve their status on a ranking site that Wizards of the Coast, the company that owns and distributes M: TG, maintains.

I'm looking at my friend Shaun, with whom I came. Shaun comes to Tommy's almost every week to compete; he's one of the better players. "Let's go in, they're about to get started," as he ambles up from the concrete sidewalk, Shaun opens the door for me. I notice the gold box he stores his cards in. "My brother won it in a tournament a while back," he will later explain, while emptying a set of polyhedron dice from the box. The store is overwhelming. In one long dusty room, four six-foot tables barely allow room for the players who sit at them. Boxes and boxes of baseball cards, Yu-gi-oh cards, Pokémon cards, and of course Magic cards line the shelves. It's clear that at one point, Tommy used to run a baseball collectible's business, but his clientele has now changed. Although a few baseball cards still haunt the glass counters in the back, M: TG cards have clearly become the dominant

collectable. I notice Shaun's name on a nearby whiteboard. In marker, weekly tournament victories are recorded, along with any corresponding spoils; Shaun will play free in August due to a July victory.

It's seven-thirty P.M; Tommy walks to the front of the store with a paper he has just printed. Demanding quiet from the rowdy group of about twenty-four players, he points at a table. With the cadence of a drill sergeant, he rattles off names one-by-one, then waits for the table to fill – in that order. This process repeats two more times, anxiety mounts as the draft nears. Each player is then given three packs of cards, like baseball cards, M: TG cards are also sold in sealed plastic sleeves. As Tommy tells the customers to start, they tear into their first package of cards, analyzing it closely. I focus again on Shaun; he removes two cards from the pile, and then quickly searches through the rest. Finding a card he's happy with, he affords a small grin. It quickly subsides as he takes the card and places it facedown on the table, shuffles the cards he had been choosing from, then passes the stack to his left. This process repeats about fourteen more times as players pass around their cards. Soon, another pack is opened – this time cards pass to the right. Finally the third pack is circulated, cards move again to the left, and the players adjourn to far corners of the room to build their decks.

The space of a M: TG draft is the epitome of a constructive gamer community. After building their decks, the players slowly mill about, swapping tips with their friends and boasting about their luck. Later, one of the players, Josh, would tell me, “about the game, I learn stuff every time I come [to Tommy's].” This sentiment is not unique; players frequently eavesdrop on one another's games, talk shop about

card strategy and adopt mentor/mentee roles, working to help one another. Online, things are rarely this personal. One participant, an online player with the handle *Lolister*, explained, “I find at least, when I’m playing, (in RL [real life]) that you get to talk to the other players a bit even if its not that much, its still more than I’ve ever found playing on MTGO [*Magic Online*] you get mostly a GG [good game], or things like that.” There is an expectation of player community at Tommy’s Card Shop that does not exist within the cyberspacial confines of *Magic Online*.

This paper explores the results of an ethnographic study on how M: TG players perceive the use-value of simulated play environments. It is important to cultivate a thick description (Geertz, 1977) of how player communities evaluate, utilize and understand the games they play. Understanding the cultural protocols surrounding player communities allows game designers to develop games better suited to integrating player interests with pedagogical goals. This study utilizes ethnographic methods to understand the reasons why players choose to use or ignore *Magic Online*, an online simulation of the offline, tabletop card game. Simulated cards, spaces and rooms present the only major differences in play between the two environments. By exploring whether practice at *Magic Online* is understood by player communities to improve gameplay in an offline environment, this study hopes to discern: 1) How players believe that skills translate from *Magic Online* to an offline environment, 2) what reasons players cite when validating or invalidating online play, and 3) the use-value players attribute to virtual skill sets.

WHAT IS MAGIC: THE GATHERING?

Although frequently regarded as a hobby, *Magic: The Gathering* (M: TG) is one of the most popular games in the world. It is a collectable card game that has been around for almost twenty years. There is an international tournament league with 250,000 members, a virtual environment with 300,000 accounts, and countless unregulated casual gameplay environments. (Hasboro) Similar to poker, the players who participate in tournament play engage in a culture of rituals that helps to distinguish them from cultures of inexperienced and casual players. The formal rituals and economic trappings of M: TG make it an appealing site of research. Sanctioned tournaments distribute packs of cards to the winners, as well as effecting player rankings that eventually enable players to compete on a national level. At the national level, and subsequent international levels, large cash prizes are allotted to the winners. These incentives and tournament structures are mirrored in *Magic Online* where players are also given the opportunity to compete in tournaments for prizes.

At its core, M: TG is a game of tactics and strategy. In tournament play<sup>i</sup>, players draft (or collect in non-tournament settings) cards, representing spells, in an attempt to construct a deck more powerful than their opponents. The players then match each other, competing for packs of cards, distributed to a bracket of the best players. The online environment serves as a useful point of comparison because of similarities in its interface and prices. Although the cards online are virtual, they retail for the same price as those offline. The virtual economy is self sufficient with a discrete but parallel set of player rankings and almost identical gameplay. The most significant difference is that the computer prompts players with rules, and walks

them through the various rule-based nuances step-by-step. When players take actions, they are logged on a sidebar, which also allows for brief web forum style conversation and the aforementioned farewell, “gg” (Good Game).

## THEORETICAL RATIONALE

Very little ethnographic work has been attempted in examining offline player communities. By performing ethnography within several role-playing groups, Fine (1983) explored how these gamers “create cultural systems” (pg. 2). This finding is later mirrored by the research of Kinkade and Katovich (2009), who described in detail the many ways these cultural systems still thrive and circulate in local Texas M: TG communities. Drawing attention to the ways communities share rituals through virtual space, Kinkade and Katovich link M: TG players to science fiction and fantasy communities, which rely more on the shared identification of a hobby than traditional geographic and temporal factors. Succinctly, Magic players share a culture more dependent sharing Dungeons & Dragons references than sharing a bar. In describing this sort of ‘geek,’ culture, Kinkade and Katovich suggest that common websites are the places where M: TG players foster this sort of community. Although web culture is analyzed in their study, the cultural impact of *Magic Online* is not considered. This paper considers *Magic Online* as a threshold space that holds deep implications for the ways gamer communities use and understand virtual spaces.

Computer-mediated gameplay is a swiftly developing area of academic study. Gee (2003) has advocated for the ability of some video games to help teach problem-solving skills. Discussing massively multiplayer online games Steinkeuhler

(2004), has discussed the acquisition of collaborative skills within player communities. Shaffer (2006) idealized epistemic games as a specific way to train students in career-specific skills, which may later become valuable on the job market. This study aims to contribute to this body of work by presenting the perspectives of alternative player types. The players examined often shy away from computer-mediated gameplay when an alternative is offered. Some players describe *Magic Online* as a waste of time while others laud its ability to help develop expertise. A dialog regarding the values held by gamers is essential to taking some first steps toward affirming a deep understanding of how players translate sets of virtual skills into an offline environment.

## METHODS

Cyber-ethnography is a growing field, which belies a growing academic interest in the cultural configurations of virtual spaces. Hine (2000) described the problems of studying cultures that exist online by dissecting the material interactive protocols of the Internet from the social spaces that exist online. In supporting the utility of context-sensitive ethnography in virtual spaces, Hine advocated an understanding of the individual social constructions of web users (pg. 40). When translating these methods into a set of methodological analytics, Hine argues that interpreting the interfaces and protocols of the internet qualify as textual analysis while a study of the cultural interactions which occur in common spaces of shared protocols are best understood through ethnographic methods. Although many qualitative methods are generally lumped into the category of ethnography, there is some debate as to its ideal configuration.

Using the model established by Geertz (1973), this paper aims to offer a contextualized description of its findings. Geertz proposed a model of ethnography, which configures the ethnographer as a translator, constantly interpreting and contextualizing culture. The ethnographer's output, must be "thick description" always placing cultural research within a context of accurate meaning (pg. 6-10). In order to provide a thick description of M: TG player communities, it is therefore essential to understand the communities that play it. Following Jenkins (2006), confronting the cultural systems and protocols which surround a technology is essential to understanding the ways in which that technology is later used (pg. 212). The ideas and methods used by Fine and Kinkade and Katovich, present a good empirical model for analyzing the culture of M: TG players. These methods are useful because they demonstrate how participating in a player community can help to provide a deep understanding of the way communities understand technologies. Scholarship on computer-mediated games rarely delves into players who are presented with an option between online and offline participation. This paper uses ethnographic methods to provide a thick description of the rationale behind using, or deciding not to use *Magic Online*.

This study takes place at officially sanctioned<sup>ii</sup> events hosted at local game stores, and community spaces in Central New Jersey and Binghamton, New York. My attendance at these sites consisted of weekly participation at Saturn Games for six months in Binghamton, New York and bi-weekly participation for one year at various locations in Central New Jersey. Additionally, I participated in several *Magic Online* drafts, often participating in a less structured fashion, playing about three



times a month for six months. My research also bled into my everyday life, as friends who were also participants in a local tournament scene would frequently want to discuss M: TG strategy. Drawing on Kinkade and Katovich, my ethnographic research involved participating in a lifestyle with implications outside of its formal gathering spaces.

Field notes have been compiled after participating in sanctioned tournament events. In compiling my notes, it was important to delineate between the players who enjoyed better reputations in community spaces, and the players who were viewed as less experienced. This was an important step in interpreting interview data. Before drafts, I would make an announcement to the community, offering volunteers an opportunity to participate in this study. Because of this semi-random sampling method, it was important to have gleaned an intuitive knowledge about how reliable and invested the player interviewed was. This sort of contextualization has been provided to help the reader evaluate and analyze the interviews conducted. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted, four online and four offline. After the eighth interview was conducted, it became clear that I had reached a saturation point, interviews were becoming repetitive and no new points were being made.

The player communities in officially sanctioned events have been selected because they meet regularly every Friday night to draft. Also, many of the players who attend consider M: TG a serious hobby, and have interests in improving their skill. In order to compensate participants in this study, I would pay for them to participate in an additional draft (valued between 15\$ and 20\$). This study shall

relate their perspectives to the ways player communities' approach and value computer games. I also disclosed a draft of this study to two established community members who verified that the research compiled accurately reflected community opinions and culture. Both reviewers verified that this is an accurate portrayal of M: TG culture. The results reported in this paper will be drawn from these eight semi-structured interviews, my field notes, and conversation in the *Magic Online* web forums.

#### BENEFITS OF ONLINE PLAY – PRACTICE AND RIGOUR

M: TG plays differently in different environments. Prior to the release of *Magic Online*, players would face each other in casual environments, such as kitchen tables and cafes. Or more competitive environments such as game stores, and sanctioned tournaments. Preferring one environment to an other is part of being a Magic player – different spaces are used for different things. Josh, a participant who identified strongly as a casual player, explained *Magic Online* was frustrating for him to use because it does not accept house rules. Different players play for different reasons, these reasons lead them to prefer one space to another. Although Josh was not particularly interested in online play, others are. A month before I met Josh, I was in Somerset, NJ – talking to Brian, one of the state's best players.

Brian has just graduated high school and is about to begin his freshman year at Rutgers University. He tells me that he's a whiz-kid, one of Jersey's best players. Shaun verifies that this is true; he's met Brian on the tournament circuit, the kid's real good. Brian has won 3500\$ at tournaments the past two years, he buys cards

like they're stocks, and he loves *Magic Online*. We're standing between a stack of board games and a wall of fantasy miniatures at The Games Pit when Brian tells me exactly how M: TG differs from *Magic Online*:

It's completely different. For starters there's events that happen every 24 hours, you're playing with people from around the world that have all these different strategies. You play against professional players, who you would never get to play on a day to day basis . . . .Sometimes I'll be drafting and I need to know a pick, whether I should pick one card or another card, I need to know what to do. So I message like three of my friends at the same time and say, "I'm drafting this, and I have this this and this, what should I pick?" And they're like "this, this, this!" They'll tell me what to pick, then later on – I can ask them why and it helps me become a better player because they're virtually right by my side helping me in the tournament. The gameplay is also a lot harder; it's harder to read people's facial expressions.

Round the clock competitive matches, collaborative thinking and multitasking come at the price of face-to-face socialization. Online, players collaborate together when drafting cards; this is illegal in real life. Practice is what *Magic Online* enables more than anything else. Dave, another player at Tommy's echoed the sentiment, "A couple of my friends play a lot on *Magic Online*. They've gotten really good just playing regularly . . . You've just got to keep repetitively playing until you can get it down to like a science." The more people are able to play, the more comfortable they become with the rules of the games.

A familiarity with the rules of M: TG is what separates the amateur from the expert. After telling me about the perks of playing *Magic Online*, Dave told me about players who are uncomfortable with the rules, “They kind of miss what they’re...miss triggers, miss effects, it kind of costs them later in the game. If you just play a card and you miss it, you’ve just kind of wasted what you did. Take it step by step, and go.” With frequent practice, any player can master the rules of M: TG, online play yields two advantages, 1) it walks players through the rules step by step, and 2) players can practice online as much as they want. It is no secret that playing *Magic Online* is a beneficial practice. Many players however, argue that there is no comparison to be made at all.

#### CRITICISM OF MAGIC ONLINE – “A HUMAN LEVEL DIFFERENCE”

*Magic Online* is frequently criticized for being impersonal. One online participant, *rkkpost* had been playing since the game was in its beta testing period around 2002. Though *rkkpost* also loves *Magic Online*, he finds most interaction to be awkward; “It feels a lot more impersonal to play someone online. Most people don't chat online during a game unless they are upset or there was a particularly good play. The game is the same, so it's probably mostly a ‘human’ level difference.” I also noticed while doing research a lack of conversation while playing online. Occasionally, I would talk to my opponent about the game, but this would never be a conversation more than one or two lines long. Given the conversations I had had with Dave and Josh, it’s clear that online players have more options. They’re not locked into conversation with a player seated across the table from them; instead

they can open facebook or AIM, and talk to people outside of the game. Although the gameplay in the online environment is similar to that of a physical space, the chat-space is completely different.

Some participants felt that the mechanics of *Magic Online* were fundamentally different. *Atomic77* owns a game store in Michigan; he doesn't think *Magic Online* should be called "Magic." When elaborating on his perspective, he explained that Magic Online feels artificial, "it was intended to be shuffled by humans. Not a program that uses numbers that generate patterns for shuffling." Complaining about the weird phenomenon produced by the random number generator, *Atomic77* continued:

RNGs [random number generators] use number sequences. Not even CLOSE man, the only way a RNG can function is to put the numbers in patterns true randomness is the search for a LACK of patterns. Look it up, the "end result" is that on a computer FAR more games are decided strictly by luck/the RNG as compared to IRL.

It is clear from this conversation that a major hurdle *Magic Online* faces is the degree to which it can accurately simulate shuffling. Although the RNGs have affected the quality of my gameplay, it is important to note that some players do notice them.

Quite helpfully, *Atomic77* brought these points to the chat room where people wait for their matches to begin. What ensued was a fairly technical conversation about the semantics of randomness. Another player, *DarkHold*, commented, "There is no such thing as random in computer language. . . Its based on an algorithm which cannot be random." Although *DarkHold* concurred with many of

the points *Atomic77* made, other players in the room were less generous. Patterns still occur when shuffling cards offline – claims *Phluxual*, “ By having clumps of cards you stacked from the table being shuffled back in to your library, you're making predictable patterns of plays you've possibly set up from the game before.” This is definitely true, when observing the shuffling habits of tournament players, they all take on fairly idiosyncratic behavior when shuffling their decks. Some randomize it by dealing the cards into five, or seven piles, (the amount of piles should be prime) and then recombining them. Others shuffle the cards obsessively, often with the finesse of a Vegas card dealer. A bad shuffle can mean an uneven distribution of land in one's deck – this creates a pacing problem equivalent to starting a game of Monopoly™ in jail. A well-shuffled deck of cards is very important to M: TG players, it can be the difference between winning and losing. It is unsurprising that the RNG is a hot topic of debate, but some players do not see *Magic Online* in such black and white terms. *Paperole*, sarcastically commented, “I still prefer being screwed by the shuffler than a dirty cheating interleaving SOB [slang: Son of a bitch] IRL [in real life].” You can not cheat in the virtual space of *Magic Online*, unfortunately offline, players sometimes do.

#### SOME NOTES ON VIRTUAL COLLABORATION

Brian confirmed that people perceive a real difference between hand shuffled cards and the RNG. It doesn't really bother him though, he wants to be able to develop his decks around the clock, *Magic Online* gives him an outlet for this

creativity. Although he agrees that is very little human interaction online, he has reconnected with a friend – as if *Magic Online* were a social networking site:

I had one friend, I thought he quit playing magic but somehow, I forgot about how, I found out his username on Magic Online, I found out it was the same guy I used to play with. I was actually reacquainted with him, three years later, via Magic Online. I don't see him in real life, at all, but now I can talk to him on Magic Online. . . Now we talk online, we discuss strategy; sometimes I borrow cards from him, its really nice.

The virtual setting of *Magic Online* doesn't encourage friendships with strangers. While in a physical space, players are able to talk with one another and network; online the process is more formal. Players are given the option to join "clans" which serve as networking spaces for interested players. I found in my research that the players who found themselves drawn to online clans were generally people who felt they had less access to a strong local group. Online, *TheNakedAtheist* explained, "The clans on magic online are the best way [to build a play test group], finding a friend online, or a group based locally." Players who met in real life however, were generally much more pessimistic about the prospects of online networking.

In these descriptions, I have evinced several ways in which players construct M: TG, both online and offline. *Magic Online* is a good fit for players in isolated communities, or those who want to practice around the clock. Other players complained about its interface, although the game itself is simulated well – the other player is badly represented. Dave echoed this point in interview:

Playing online, the only way to communicate is with chat and that kind of takes the flavor out of it for me, I like being able to talk to my opponent and in real life, it's like I'm playing against someone – whether you lose or you win, if you've played a good game with the person, it's good to shake their hand afterwards.

For many players, online play is simply too impersonal. This is a fundamental aspect of the program's design, unless players treat *Magic Online* like a social networking site and cultivate a list of their friends who also play, matches are randomized. This means that players are constantly pitted against strange, anonymous opponents. In these matches, socialization takes a back seat to competition.

## ANALYSIS

Although players often see *Magic Online* as a great way to practice and improve their gameplay, it falls short at developing collaborative skills. Several participants claim that it has enabled collaborative learning, but rarely do players believe that the interface fosters it. This is an interesting finding because it complicates Steinkuehler's (2004) points about online learning. Where *Legacy* is a fully realized massively multiplayer, three-dimensional environment, *Magic Online* is a two dimensional recreation of the card game. The player is invited to analyze only the play area and sees a static illustration of their opponent's avatar in the corner of the screen. Cyber-discourse has traditionally suffered from the ambiguity of liveness, as Auslander (2002) explains, in chat areas there are few immediate ways to distinguish a person from a robot. *Magic Online's* text oriented interface



suffers from this same problem. Although the program has been devised in an effort to allow players a chance to compete without traditional geographic boundaries, more often than not competing players act like super-intelligent robots – prioritizing the game and not conversation.

This is not to imply that *Magic Online* does not help facilitate learning, far from it. Players, like Brian and Dave, argued strongly for its potential in improving their gameplay. Instead of limiting themselves to a singular player community, they are able to find new opponents nightly. *Magic Online* is an excellent space of constructive collaboration, but it offers an inadequate set of tools to help make community seem more personal. Players like Josh draft at Tommy's Card Shop specifically because there is a built in community, with mentors and a competitive atmosphere. Josh is not yet prepared for complete immersion, he is content with the community he has. Too much time on the computer is something Josh is looking to avoid, and Tommy's Card Shop is a good way to evade that problem, "[Being Social] means doing something with other people, so I'm not there sitting in front of my computer like I've been doing all summer." Even though Josh admits that while he is away at college (In upstate New York), and there was no community to play M: TG with, he is wary of becoming addicted to a computer game. Players like Josh show a social resilience to online play, it is not yet normal to socialize mainly in online communities, so Josh seeks community elsewhere.

One participant, Tony, voiced the concerns of everyone I had interviewed, "I'd rather play face to face, but if I want to play Magic, and there's nobody around, I play online." The players interviewed all prefer to interact with one another without

a computer acting as an intermediary. Although none went as far as to claim that online play was a waste of their time, the conditions which provoked online play were fairly clear. Online play is what you do when you do not have as much access to player communities as you might like. Whether the player has just had a child like *TheNakedAtheist*, or the player is just looking to improve – like Brain, *Magic Online* fills a gap in the lives of players who just want more.

## CONCLUSION

On the way out of the Tommy's Card Shop, while saying goodbye to Shaun, I was stopped. "Are you the guy, asking all the questions about *Magic Online*?" A tall man leaning on the hood of a pickup asked me. I admitted that I was and fumbled in my bag for my tape recorder, the man had something to say. "In *Magic Online*, things happen automatically, instead of you knowing the rules. You knowing the rules makes you a better player. Most of the modern decks that are doing well are combo decks that are intricate with using the rules." This immediately ignited a conversation in the parking lot. Another player, Stephen, was able to mediate conversation with a point everyone could agree on, "I agree that in real life, you get lazy with the triggers sometimes, so in real life sometimes you'll forget cause they don't pop up right in front of you. In rules in general, I think it teaches you more, just how to properly interact in the game." It started to dawn upon me at this point, just how nuanced the strategy of M: TG was, and how there were various reputable ways to learn it both online and offline. *Magic Online* was an excellent virtual space to

analyze, but different players have different needs, and no one environment can accommodate everyone equally.

In some ways this study was limited because it only focused on the M: TG tournament draft community. Although I spoke to many women, and recorded their comments in my field notes, none volunteered for an interview in this study. In future iterations, I hope to sample a more diverse segment of the population, as the majority of volunteers were white males. The study was also limited in so far as M: TG is a competitive game, with commercial distribution, and no pre-established learning goals. Although I believe my research in constructing and understanding virtual spaces to be thorough and complete, M: TG shares very little with what many would consider serious game design. Instead, there is a somewhat devoted player community, competing often for prestige and cash prizes. Although this is a limitation because these findings should not be generalized, it helps to validate the focus of this paper, which is ultimately a rethinking of virtual space. If devout players have trouble acclimating to *Magic Online*, which holds several pedagogical benefits, then less interested players of less engaging games may share similar biases.

A big question that emerged through the research of this project was what sort of features can make virtual spaces seem more realistic? Clearly the simple emulation of game mechanics is not enough, if games are to develop in online communities, players need to become invested on several other levels. A future study will compare these findings to those which have studied games that are staged entirely in virtual space. By highlighting the various ways players negotiate and

understand online gaming environments, this paper has established that online environments are not understood as equivalents to physical spaces. Furthermore, this study points to a prioritization of offline play for community and material reasons. These results complicate the development of serious play by pointing to a latent cultural bias regarding the “authentic” value of the material world. Only by facilitating a deep understanding of these points of social contention, can game developers work to design games that work to bridge biases of the virtual in game players.

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<sup>i</sup> There are many different varieties of tournament play, I’ve decided to focus on Magic drafts because they are the lowest cost-entry point into competitive play. Players need to purchase three packs of cards (Which retail around 3.99\$ each, at the time of this study) and pay a small, usually two dollar, entry fee.

<sup>ii</sup> The Duelists' Convocation International (DCI) is the official Magic player league that organizes a set of rankings and events within which players compete for prizes and prestige.

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