

Magic: the Gathering Etiquette

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This is a guide based on my personal views of etiquette. These views have been posted on www.recoculous.com. There are two sections. One, an introduction to Magic etiquette (available on November 26, 2009 as “Magic: the Gathering Etiquette”). Two, the Etiquette rules (available on December 6, 2009 as “Magic: the Gathering Etiquette Part 2”).

Introduction

The main reason to play Magic is to have fun, so etiquette demands that we constrain our behavior in order to make sure people can enjoy themselves. Not everyone will object to the same behavior, but there are some rules of thumb that will help “lead to the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people.” Although etiquette is not technically the same thing as morality, some actions of etiquette are “right” or “wrong” to a minor degree. There are at least three main categories of etiquette: obligations, above the call of duty, and indifferent.

Breaking the Rules is Not Etiquette

Breaking the rules is somewhere between serious morality and etiquette. Cheating isn’t “just indecent.” Cheating is more serious than that. Still, cheating at Magic isn’t necessarily a serious moral requirement. (It doesn’t usually kill anyone or ruin anyone’s life.)

Breaking the rules is known as “[tournament violations](#).” It includes cheating, collusion or bribery, wager, unsporting conduct, and slow play. These behaviors are not “just against etiquette” because etiquette can’t be mandatory.

Of course, the rule against “unsporting conduct” sounds like it might be about etiquette. In fact, this rule demands that “[Tournament participants must behave in a polite and respectful manner \[PDF\]](#)” (24). However, no rule can be made that forbids us from giving an opponent a dirty look. We can understand unsporting conduct better by looking at the actual [Infraction Procedure Guide \[PDF\]](#), which states the following:

Unsporting conduct is disruptive behavior that may affect the safety, competitiveness, or enjoyment of an event in a significantly negative fashion”...
Unsporting behavior is not the same as a lack of sporting behavior. There is a wide middle ground of “competitive” behavior that is certainly neither “nice” nor “sporting” but still doesn’t qualify as “unsporting.” The Head Judge is the final arbiter on what constitutes unsporting conduct.

In other words, unsporting conduct doesn’t require us to be polite. It just forbids us from being significantly disruptive.

Obligations

Only the most serious sorts of actions should be considered to be obligatory. Obligations of etiquette are not moral obligations. Instead, they are requirements for decency. Making fun of an opponent is incompatible with etiquette, and we have a duty to talk a little to an opponent. (To refuse to say, “Hi, I’m so-and-so” would be rude.)

Above the Call of Duty

Some behavior is a good idea, even though it isn’t an obligation. It’s a good idea to keep complaining to a minimum even when you lose to mana screw. Complimenting an opponent for making a good deck or playing well is not a requirement, but it can be polite to do so.

Indifferent

Some behavior makes little or no difference to etiquette, such as going to the bathroom between games; or whether or not you want to trade with people.

Examples

Most people who discuss etiquette spend very little time discussing the categories of etiquette and they want to concentrate on etiquette “rules.” They want to tell us how to behave. I want to make it clear which category various kinds of behavior fit into.

Handshake: A handshake is mandatory for formal games of chess, but Magic is often very informal. However, it is rude to refuse to shake an opponent’s hand who wants to shake your hand. That’s just common sense. (Of course, if your opponent is sick, you have an overriding reason to not want to shake his or her hand.)

Small talk: During formal games of chess and poker, you should reduce talk to a minimum. During formal games of Magic, we are also obligated to reduce talking to a minimum. The only time you should make small talk during a game is when the opponent is open to it. You should pay close attention to how to opponent reacts.

A minimal amount of talk is necessary to be polite, but you aren’t obligated to make much small talk or treat the opponent as a friend. Doing so can be polite, but it’s not a requirement.

Spectators who talk: It is inevitable that some people will watch our games and talk about it. However, it is “against the rules” for an opponent to give advice or convey hidden information while watching us play. It’s not just against etiquette, it’s already against the rules. I agree with that rule. To help someone while watching them play is a form of cheating.

Insulting your opponent: Obviously rude behavior. It’s incompatible with etiquette. (If the opponent is a friend who is receptive to this kind of thing, it might be OK, but it’s not something you should do to people who might get upset by it.)

Accusing an opponent of cheating is a necessary evil, which is cause to get a judge. However, it is rude to accuse of opponent of cheating after the judge has found them to be innocent.

Swearing: People I play with swear occasionally, but it is actually against the rules. It's considered to be unsporting behavior. The rule against swearing is a little over the top, but it is still against the rules

To help your opponent: Sometimes players want to "take back" a move. They should realize their mistake immediately in order to be allowed to take it back. However, sometimes it can be appropriate to ask a player, "Are you sure you want to do that?" to give them a chance to realize they are going to make a mistake. To help your opponent is usually "above the call of duty," but some professional players will be insulted by it. If an opponent is insulted, then you still have no obligation to stop offering help, but it might be "above the call of duty" to stop doing it.

Accommodate to the opponent's attitude: It would be absurd to require us to behave "however our opponent wants us to," but it can be considered to be "above the call of duty" to do so. If the opponent would like you to play quickly to finish before time runs out, it can be polite to comply. Still, it isn't a requirement of etiquette. We don't have to be "people pleasing" all the time.

Make your opponent uncomfortable: What about getting food in front of a starving opponent? This isn't about being people pleasing. It's about making your opponent uncomfortable. However, it would still be "above the call of duty" to refuse to make your opponent uncomfortable. We aren't obligated to make our opponents happy.

Demand sporting behavior: It is rude to demand sporting behavior of an opponent. We can only control our own behavior. However, egregious offenses could be a good reason to speak out against someone's behavior. Making fun of how someone talks, of their race, of their religion, and so on could be considered to be very serious offenses. (Of course, that behavior could end up being against the rules anyway.)

Complaining: To attribute your game loss to luck is rude. The opponent is basically told that he or she didn't "really win." It takes away from the opponent's fun. Complaining to friends when the opponent isn't around isn't very rude, but it is a good idea to reduce it to a minimum as well. People are not going to have much fun listening to you complain. (Sometimes I like to complain about the actual design of Magic, which is more understandable. It isn't about why I lost a game in particular. Instead, it's about how the design of the game could be improved.)

To demand you play by the rules: Some people are "rules lawyers" because they try to get you into trouble for not stating your game action precisely. This behavior is rude, but it is *always* OK to demand that an opponent play by the rules. The intent of a game action must be conveyed, but it doesn't have to be conveyed in any one specific way.

Breaking the rules: [Zaiem Beg](#) argued that players who "break the rules" on accident shouldn't take back their action *if it takes a while to realize that a mistake was made*. If you played a sorcery as an instant that gave you an advantage a turn ago, then it's "too late." You can't change

the past. Breaking the rules in this way will give someone (or both players) a warning for “sloppy play.”

Of course, the person who broke the rules might realize that he or she couldn't have won without breaking the rules. He or she could offer a rematch or concede, but that would be above the call of duty.

Tricking your opponent: Sometimes you attack with the hope that the opponent won't block. You hope to “bluff” your opponent into expecting some kind of trick. This is part of the game and has nothing to do with etiquette.

However, it is possible to try to trick the opponent into conceding by implying that you win. This can be equivalent to lying to the opponent, even if you don't “technically” lie. In such a situation, you are basically cheating. (For example, to say “Fireball for 5” when an opponent is at 5 is cheating if you don't really have Fireball, even though you didn't say, “I cast Fireball for 5 damage.”

Reciprocity

It's not a good idea to always “treat an opponent how they treat you.” If an opponent is rude, that doesn't mean you should be rude back. This kind of behavior is basically a way of demanding sporting behavior. We can only demand that players abide by the rules. Of course, we can only forbid highly disrupting behavior. [Zaiem Beg](#) argues that it might make sense to refuse to shake an opponent's hand if they are rude to you. I disagree. We can't demand that people are polite to us. We can't require opponents to behave in a way that pleases us.

Of course, if an opponent is continually rude to us, we might think that player no longer deserves our politeness. I define “politeness” as “above the call of duty.” We never had to be polite. We just aren't supposed to be rude. Refusing to shake an opponent's hand at the end of a game is rude. The only time that you aren't required to shake an opponent's hand is when he or she was significantly disruptive. Such behavior would have to be “against the rules” or significantly immoral.

Conclusion

I decided to write my own two cents on Magic Etiquette after reading [You are not a Pretty Pretty Princess](#) by Zaiem Beg. I agree with most of the judgments made by Zaiem Beg, but I hoped a few new moral distinctions might help.

We aren't obligated to be “polite,” and doing so is “above the call of duty.” However, we are obligated to be decent. Etiquette requires us to refrain from rude behavior. Additionally, highly disruptive behavior is already “against the rules,” and is not merely “rude.” It's worse than being rude and is a notch closer to being “immoral.” No one can make us behave decently, but they can forbid us from behaving immorally.

Etiquette Rules

This is a list of my personal etiquette rules for Magic: the Gathering. These are rules of thumb based on my personal experience. They are only rules to follow “if you want to have good etiquette” and/or “want to make Magic: the Gathering more fun.” (An obligation of etiquette is only a requirement to have good sportsmanship.)

I don't actually expect anyone to have good etiquette, and there can be moral considerations that override etiquette. Sometimes honesty is of greater importance, but not always. Philosophers have found out that questioning people's beliefs is often taken as an insult, but sometimes it is morally praiseworthy to do so anyway.

However, we do want people to have good etiquette in general. We just can't demand it of others. Etiquette is not a moral obligation; it's just a way to help others have a good time.

I will use the following categories to list the etiquette rules: obligations, impermissible behavior, encouraged behavior, discouraged behavior, and indifferent behavior. Impermissible behavior is behavior we are obligated not to do. Encouraged and discouraged behavior are both “above the call of duty.” Indifferent behavior is basically neither good nor bad as far as etiquette is concerned.

Obligations

- Treat everyone with respect.
- Maintain a satisfactory level of personal hygiene. (Wear deodorant. Wash your hands. Take a shower every once in a while.)
- You can make a mess, but if you do, clean it up.
- You can eat pizza and other greasy foods, but if you do, don't touch the opponent's cards. Even if they are in sleeves.
- Untap your permanents before your upkeep.
- If you shuffle the opponent's cards, you must be gentle. Especially if they are not in sleeves.

Impermissible

- Insulting people.
- To require others to have good etiquette, or even to tell them about their rude behavior.
- To refuse to give the opponent a handshake.
- To make small talk with an opponent who is trying to concentrate on playing the game.
- Complaining to the opponent. (Don't tell your opponent that you only lost because he or she got lucky, or that you got unlucky.)
- Demand that the opponent have good etiquette.
- To require the opponent to describe every play in a precise way.
- Questioning someone's religious or political beliefs.
- Doing a victory dance in front of your opponent.

Encouraged

- Be polite.
- Help your opponent (realize your creature is untapped when he wants to attack).
- Let your opponent take a move back immediately after he declares to do something if he wants to take it back right away.
- Have pleasant conversations with your opponents before and after the game.
- Try to behave in a way that doesn't bother your opponent.
- To give the opponent a handshake after the game.
- If the opponent is a self-professed novice, you can offer to take a look at his or her deck after the game to let him or her know if you have any advice involving deck construction.
- If you don't play by the rules and win because of that fact, you can offer a rematch or concede.

Discouraged

- Complaining to your friends.
- Showing signs that you are frustrated or angry.
- Leaving your food in front of a hungry opponent.
- Trying to distract the opponent.
- Talking about region or politics.
- To brag about doing well or getting lucky.
- To use the opponent's dice to determine who plays first without permission.
- To pick up an opponent's card without permission.

Indifferent

- Bluffing
- Criticizing the game design (with constructive criticism).
- To mislead the opponent by carefully worded sentences that "don't technically" imply what an opponent might assume is implied. (There is a fine line here. If you really do imply you have a fireball in your hand and the opponent is at 2 life, that might be cheating.)
- Requiring your opponents to play by the rules. (To make them untap their permanents before their upkeep.)