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Magic: The Gathering Online 3.0 and the Theory of Virtual Objects. (PC)

The success of *Magic: The Gathering Online* may indicate the future of MMOs.

By [Allen 'Delsyn' Rausch](#) | May 27, 2005

At first glance, Wizards of the Coast often seems like an odd company to have such a large booth presence at E3. Oh sure, it's the holder of the *Dungeons & Dragons* property which is currently licensed out in videogame form to Atari and Turbine. *Dungeons & Dragons* videogames and their other licensed properties are more than adequately represented by their license holders, though. Every other product done by the company belongs squarely in the paper-and-pencil RPG world -- except one. That product is *Magic: The Gathering Online*. Launched several years ago, it's quietly become an enormous success for the company, and as the game prepares to enter its third version, the lessons learned by the company may have a profound impact on the future of gaming.

"We always laugh when we see MMO developers or companies arguing over the nitty-gritty of virtual objects." Justin Ziran, Brand Manager for *Magic: The Gathering* said to me during my demonstration of *Magic: The Gathering Online 3.0*. "We worked a lot of that out with our customer base years ago." Ziran's not kidding. One of the biggest bones of contention right now in the MMO scene is the secondary aftermarket for virtual items.



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struggle to find better business models than monthly subscription fees, virtual property seems like a lucrative market just waiting to be developed -- so much so that Sony just got into the act by officially legitimizing the trading of accounts. Even the Xbox 360 touts as one of its selling point the capability of performing "micro-transactions."

Magic: The Gathering Online, on the other hand, has built its entire business model around the concept of virtual property. From its inception, the game has been free to download and use. Players also get some basic cards to start with, and can add a few more if they purchase the (real-world) "Core Set". These cards, however, only exist on the *Magic: The Gathering Online* servers. Other than the fact that they're digital, though, they are for all intents and purposes, real. Players seeking to enter ranked tournaments or special events or participate in anything other than the free practice area must purchase cards the same way they would from a real world dealer.

"The idea of placing value on virtual property can be a tough hurdle for anyone to get over at first" Ziran said, "So we as a company make it as easy as possible to start thinking of these objects as 'real.'" One of the ways they do that is by offering players the option to trade in virtual cards for identical real world ones at any time. Doing so, however, eliminates the virtual ones in the game's database, meaning that the player won't have access to them for online play. "I know it's not practical for MMO companies to offer to create a real sword for a player if they'd like to take it out of a game, but there's no reason not to offer to make a special one as part of a promotion or something." Ziran said.

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