

# TABLETOP GAMING ETIQUETTE

James Gray, December 5, 2009 – March 30, 2021.

This is a guide based on my personal views of etiquette. These views have been posted on [www.recofulous.com](http://www.recofulous.com) several years ago when it was a website focused on Magic: the Gathering. Originally, there were two sections. One, from November 26, 2009, as “Magic: the Gathering Etiquette”. Two, available on December 6, 2009, as “Magic: the Gathering Etiquette Part 2.”

## INTRODUCTION

The main reason to play tabletop games is to have fun, so etiquette demands that we constrain our behavior in order to try 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 greater 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*, *beyond the call of duty*, and *indifferent*.

## BREAKING THE RULES

Breaking the rules of a game is somewhere between serious morality and etiquette. Cheating isn’t “just indecent.” Cheating is more serious than that. Still, cheating at a tabletop game isn’t necessarily a serious moral violation. (It doesn’t usually kill anyone or ruin anyone’s life.) Regarding breaking the rules can be a type of “[tournament violation](#).” For Magic: the Gathering tournaments, 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, at one point this rule demanded that “[t]ournament participants must behave in a polite and respectful manner” (24). However, no rule can be made that forbids us from giving an opponent a dirty look. We can understand the official Magic: the Gathering understanding of unsporting conduct better by looking at the *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

Obligations of etiquette are not moral obligations. Instead, they are requirements for decency. Only morally neutral actions with the most serious implications should be considered to be obligatory in the etiquette sense. We are obligated not to do certain actions that would be a serious etiquette violations. 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.)

## BEYOND 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 from randomness (“bad luck”). 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.

## EXAMPLES

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 tabletop games are often very informal. Even so, it is rude to refuse to shake an opponent’s hand who wants to shake your hand. (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 serious tabletop games, 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 sometimes *against the tournament 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:** This is 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:** It is a necessary evil when you have evidence it is actually happening. It is a good reason to get a judge in a tournament setting. 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 some official tournament rules for Magic: the Gathering. It's considered to be unsporting behavior. The rule against swearing is a little over the top, but it might make sense if you need a setting considered to be child friendly.

**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 *beyond 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 in that case it might be *beyond 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 *beyond 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 hungry opponent? This isn't about being people pleasing. It's about making your opponent uncomfortable. However, it would still be *beyond 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 tournament *rules* as well.)

**Complaining:** To attribute your game loss to luck is rude. The opponent is basically told that they didn't *really win*, in a sense. 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.

**To demand others play by the rules:** Some people are "rules lawyers" because they try to get others into trouble for not stating the game action in a precise way. 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 game rules:** Breaking the rules on accident is common. If you did it a while ago and no one noticed right away, it is usually best to keep going and allow the mistake. You can't change the past. In some tournament settings, 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 they couldn't have won without breaking the rules. At that point it could be best to offer a rematch or concede, but that would be *beyond the call of duty*.

**Tricking your opponent:** Bluffing is important in many games, even though it is mostly famous in poker. This is usually 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, which is worse than an etiquette violation.

**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. 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 "beyond 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. Even so, you aren't required by etiquette to shake an opponent's hand when they were significantly disruptive. Such behavior would have to be *against the rules* or bordering on an ethical violation.

# ETIQUETTE RULES

This is a list of my personal etiquette rules for tabletop gaming. 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 playing tabletop games more fun.” (An obligation of etiquette in this case is only a requirement to have sporting conduct.)

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. Even so, 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 *beyond the call of duty*. Indifferent behavior is basically neither good nor bad as far as etiquette is concerned.

## OBLIGATIONS

- 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.
- If you shuffle the opponent's cards, you must be gentle. Especially if they are not in sleeves.

## IMPERMISSIBLE

- Don't Insult people.
- Don't demand that others to have good etiquette, or even to tell them about their rude behavior.
- Don't refuse to give the opponent a handshake.
- To make small talk with an opponent who is trying to concentrate on playing the game.
- Don't complain to an opponent. (Don't tell your opponent that you only lost because they got lucky, or that you got unlucky.)
- Don't demand that the opponent have good etiquette.
- Don't require the opponent to describe every play in a precise way.
- Don't question someone's religious or political beliefs.
- Don't do a victory dance in front of your opponent.
- Don't mislead an opponent into thinking you won.

## ENCOURAGED

- Be polite.
- Help your opponent play the game better.
- Let your opponent take a move back immediately after they declare to do something.
- Have pleasant conversations with your opponents before and after the game, but don't do it to distract them from playing the game well.
- 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 violate the rules on accident, and win because of that fact, you can offer a rematch or concede.

## DISCOURAGED

- Don't complain to your friends.
- Don't show signs that you are frustrated or angry.
- Don't leave your food in front of a hungry opponent.
- Don't try to distract the opponent.
- Don't talk about region or politics.
- Don't brag about doing well or getting lucky.
- Don't use the opponent's dice to determine who plays first without permission.
- Don't pick up an opponent's card without permission.
- Don't mislead the opponent by carefully worded sentences that *don't technically* imply what an opponent is likely to assume is implied.

## INDIFFERENT

- Bluffing
- Criticizing the game design (with constructive criticism).
- Requiring your opponents to play by the rules in a strict way.

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