



# 9 Takeaways from Duelyst: From Tabletop to Digital Game

Eric Lang & Keith Lee  
Lead Designers, Counterplay Games





Who are we?



# Eric Lang

Lead Game Designer



15+ years tabletop experience & 2016 Diana Jones Award Winner

Shipped 13+ games including CCG, LCG, tabletop, and tactics games:

Blood Rage, Rising Sun, Marvel Dice Masters, Quarriors, XCOM board games

Warhammer 40,000: Conquest, World of Warcraft TCG

Game of Thrones, Star Wars, LOTR, Call of Cthulhu card games

# Keith Lee

CEO & Creative Director



Lead Producer for Diablo III at Blizzard Entertainment

Lead Game Programmer for Ratchet & Clank series at Insomniac Games





What is Duelest?



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## **Collectible Tactics Game**

Online 1v1 turn based battles on 9x5 board

Assemble your deck from 500+ cards across 6 factions

250,000 matches played daily on PC/Mac/Web

Inspirations: Final Fantasy Tactics, Fire Emblem





PLAYER 1

9 / 9

PLAYER 2

6 / 6 HAND

9 / 9

25

25

1

1

REPLACE

DECK 15 / 40

2

4

6

3

1

4

END TURN

MENU

FRIENDS (0)



LYONAR

SONGHAI

VETRUVIDAN

ABYSSIAN

MAGMAR

VANAR

NEUTRAL

Search



6

STORM ARATHA  
MINION

6

5

Flying

X1

6

STORMMETAL GOLEM  
GOLEM

8

8

X3

7

ASTRAL CRUSADER  
MINION

7

6

Whenever you replace this card, it  
costs 1 less and gains +1/+1.

7

DARK NEMESIS  
MINION

4

10

At the start of your turn, deal 4  
damage to the enemy General and  
this minion gains +4 Attack.

X2

7

DRAGONBONE GOLEM  
GOLEM

10

10

X3

7

E'XUN  
MINION

5

5

Forcefield

Whenever this minion attacks or is  
attacked, draw a card.

7

GRAILMASTER  
MINION

6

6

Whenever you summon a minion,  
this minion gains a random  
keyword ability.

X1

7

PADDO  
MINION

12

6

Airdrop

Opening Gambit: Push ALL  
nearby minions and Generals to  
random spaces on the battlefield.

X3

V

28 Units - 11 Spells - 0 Artifacts

M

27 Units - 9 Spells - 3 Artifacts

S

26 Units - 13 Spells - 0 Artifacts

L

30 Units - 9 Spells - 0 Artifacts

V

24 Units - 11 Spells - 4 Artifacts

A

23 Units - 15 Spells - 1 Artifacts

NEW DECK



DISMISS NEW

BACK







How did Duelyst get started?











## Prototyping Board State:

Chessex vinyl mat

Bag of polyhedral dice

Card sleeve protectors

Pathfinder miniatures - unique heroes

Bag of generic fantasy miniatures





A surreal landscape with a floating skyscraper and floating rectangular blocks. The scene is set against a backdrop of soft, pastel clouds in shades of blue, pink, and white. In the center, a tall, modern skyscraper with a glass facade floats in the air. Several other rectangular blocks of varying sizes and colors (white, light blue, and pink) are scattered throughout the sky, some appearing to float and others to be falling. The ground below is a vast, flat expanse of land with a mix of green and brown patches, suggesting a natural environment. In the foreground, there are rolling hills and a winding road that leads towards the horizon. The overall atmosphere is dreamlike and ethereal.

What are the strengths of digital?

# Strengths

- Highly interactive social experience
- Ability to read secondary expressions

- Find players anywhere, anytime
- Hides massive number crunching

**Tabletop**

**Digital**

- Difficult to schedule and plan
- Big time commitment

- Lacks deeper person-to-person interaction
- Easily distracted / impatient

# Weaknesses



A surreal landscape with a floating digital building and falling data blocks. The scene is set against a backdrop of soft, pastel clouds in shades of blue and pink. In the center, a tall, white, rectangular building with a grid-like top floats in the air. Below it, a small, dark, rectangular platform also floats. The ground is a vast, flat expanse of reddish-brown earth, with a winding path leading towards the horizon. In the distance, there are rolling hills and a small, dark, rectangular building. The sky is filled with soft, pastel clouds, and several small, white, rectangular blocks are falling from the sky, resembling digital data or code. The overall atmosphere is dreamlike and futuristic.

Does tabletop == digital persona?



# Hypothesis for Digital

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- 1) Shorter play sessions < 10 minutes
- 2) Per match variety is top priority (not 'samey')  
[tabletop has more variety due to unique social interactions]
- 3) Playing with anonymous players



# Data: Player Behavior

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Average playtime: ~86 minutes daily

Average Games: 6 matches daily

= Each match < 15 minutes



# Key Design Pillars

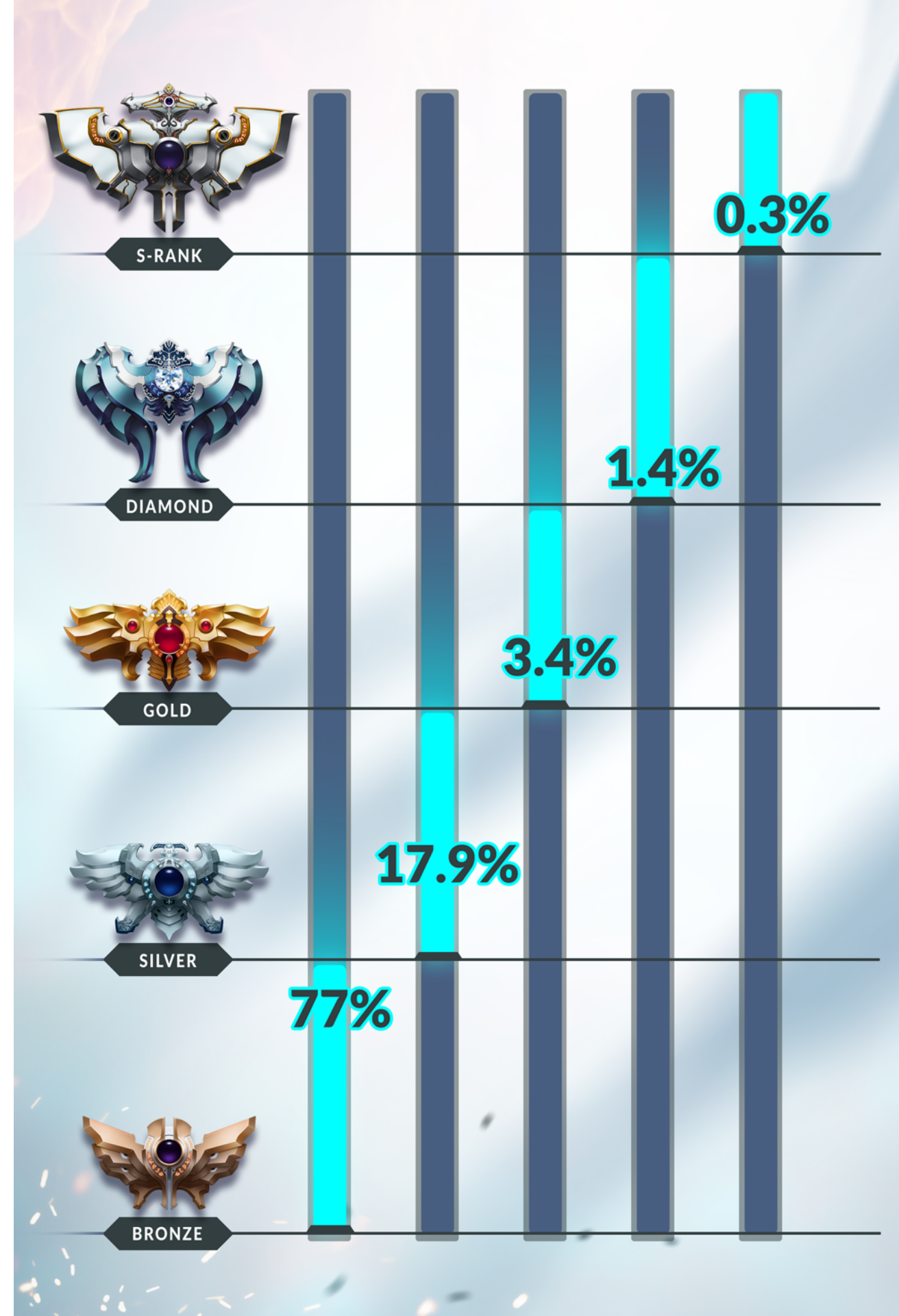
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- 1) Enforce match time upper bound to 10 minutes
- 2) Offer wide variety of deck archetypes
- 3) Build player confidence + skill level



# Intended Ranked Player Distribution

NOT Gaussian Normal Distribution  
Instead, skewed towards time served







# Takeaway No.1



# #1 Focus on real-time interactivity

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Show opponent's mouse movements & interactions in real-time

[Make it feel as though you're playing human component]

Summary: **Always keep player engaged when inactive**





RYVIRATH

25



connected



SIBON

25



34 / 40 DECK 5 / 6 HAND

3 / 3

ENEMY TURN

BATTLELOG



DECK 33 / 40



3



2



4



3



5



1

ENEMY TURN

MENU FRIENDS (11)

Activate Windows  
Go to Settings to activate Windows.



# #1 Focus on real-time interactivity

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Offer restricted level of player-to-player interaction:

Emotes + Expressive Language

Buddy List w/ chat

Replay Sharing

Watch interesting division matches + spectate







# #1 Focus on real-time interactivity

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Very short matchmaking queue times (< 20 seconds) [roving eye in War3]

Avoided pushing out multiple game modes at launch

Started w/ Ranked Ladder + Draft Mode (The Gauntlet)

No Casual Mode

Only now adding Rainbow Mode





# Takeaway No.2



## #2 You're only as good as your matchmaking systems

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Multi-metric w/ weighted parameters, reduced to normalized range for Rating Score

- 1) Rank radius
- 2) Time served
- 3) Win count
- 4) Queue wait time
- 5) Never same opponent back-to-back
- 6) Cohort-based



# #2 You're only as good as your matchmaking systems

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Competitive play

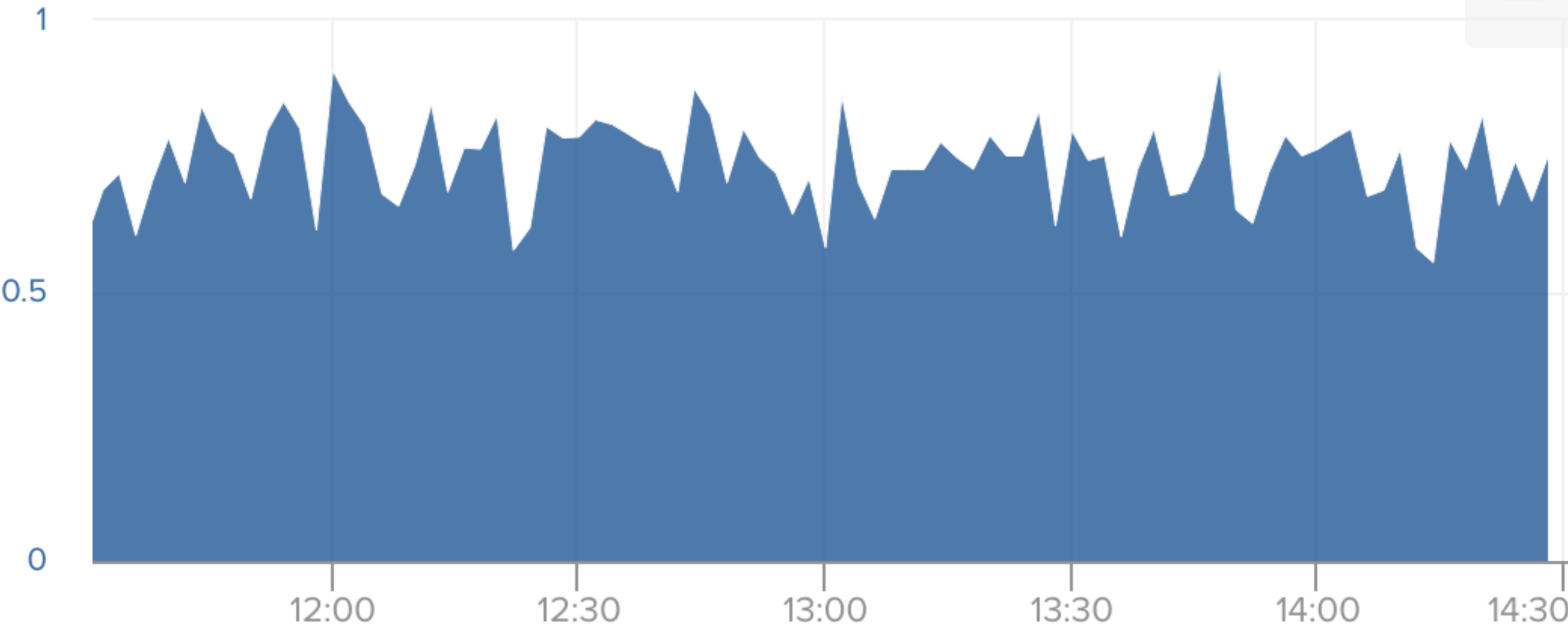
1.0 perfect, 0.75 great, 0.5 good, 0.0 poor (same player twice in a row)

**Casual matchmaking is HARD**

Peter Drucker: "What gets measured, gets improved."

Build a system w/ granularity across ranked divisions

# B matchmaking quality







# Takeaway No.3

# #3 Extracting fun from losses

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**How can the player still have fun after losing a match?**

[With tabletop, you can still end session having had social fun/capital]

Play Quests vs Win Quests

Beware players conceding to game the system, must consider penalties

Faction Progression System

Get Orbs after losing X games



# // DAILY QUESTS



First Win of the Day (+20 Gold): ACTIVE

<p>Win 1 Practice Game</p>  <p>Win 1 practice game.</p> <p>0 / 1</p> <p>STARTER</p>	<p>Vanar Challenger</p>  <p>25</p> <p>Play 4 online games with a Vanar Deck.</p> <p>0 / 4</p> <p>REPLACE</p>	<p>Welcome Back!</p>  <p>25</p> <p>Play 3 Games.</p> <p>0 / 3</p> <p></p>
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You can replace each quest once per day.  
New Quests added in: 1 Hour 49 Minutes 52 Seconds

# #3 Extracting fun from losses

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Within a match itself, game design pacing built around milestones

Achieving combos

Learning Moments





# Takeaway No.4

## #4 Encourage Positive Behaviors

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Player Gifting (great rewards to recipient w/ rate limiting)

Winners Tipping

Top 50 Tipping Leaderboard

[Helps to distribute Gold across the player ecosystem]





# DUELIST™

## TOP 50 GOLD TIPPERS OCT 2016

1 nara10	26 islamhetlar
2 f8d	27 bamhorse
3 paul30604	28 eldynamite
4 williamblake	29 sk1llz9
5 t2k5	30 envybaer
6 pagogo	31 mightyassassin7
7 iplayonlyabyssian	32 jumjuml
8 darklordsen	33 southpaw
9 kingsley	34 zerotheabsolute
10 retsudoyagyu	35 thaliak
11 peachesftw	36 nowayitsj
12 blankzero	37 beardier
13 althur	38 flutin
14 xbuster	39 jogdhai
15 haxishax	40 omiknight52
16 antiitna	41 huliganjetta
17 proginoskes	42 floss2xdaily
18 dannyst	43 rainesama
19 chronos33	44 themagma
20 lia	45 sephytreebeard
21 lovelylioness	46 mechan1x
22 nitroxylin	47 r0lf
23 equifinality	48 ascetis
24 mka	49 isthore
25 supremeegg	50 mmf



# Takeaway No.5



## #5 Create Progression Vectors w/ 1 Goal

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Achievements: Dinged at specific points to reinforce play patterns

eg. lose several matches in a row

eg. disenchant first card, achievement to give you enough spirit to craft new card

FTUE (First Time User Experience): Focus on the gameplay, not the meta-systems

Faction Progression: Avoided lump sum starter bundles and packs

[players don't yet know how to best value them + overwhelming]

# #5 Create Progression Vectors w/ 1 Goal

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Goal: Avoid hyper literal text

Lower card word count, 30 chars per line, hard max of 4 lines

Single abilities per card (especially early progression cards)

Discoverable Abilities (eg. Variax)



## #5 Create Progression Vectors w/ 1 Goal

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**BAD:** Kara Bloodborn Spell:

**“Whenever you summon a minion from anywhere this turn, give it +1/+1.”**

[Intent: Tell player bbs works with tokens, rather than just minions from hand.]

**GOOD:** Kara Bloodborn Spell:

**“Any minion you summon this turn gains +1/+1.”**



# Takeaway No.6



## #6 Offer catch-up mechanics

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Not everyone can catch up to hardcore players (skill/collection gap)

Originally, we had discrete X wins for Y gold

But this only favors better skilled, experienced players

‘Stronger get richer’

Our solution: Front-load the bulk of rewards (daily/weekly/monthly)

# #6 Offer catch-up mechanics

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Welcome Back Quest

5 Gold for very daily quest you complete; Stacks to 25



## #6 Offer catch-up mechanics

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**Old:** 10 Gold every 4 Ranked Plays (daily max of 50 Gold)

Issue: Players concede 20 games on ladder

**New:** 5 Gold per 2 Wins

First 14 wins per day, you get +10 bonus per completion

15 Gold per 2 Wins

# #6 Offer catch-up mechanics

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## **In-game matches:**

Mana ramps up every turn

Stakes elevate from turn-to-turn

Strong board clears





# Takeaway No.7

# #7 Continuous Content + Patch Updates

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Built on Web for testing/deploys, then PC (100% in Javascript)

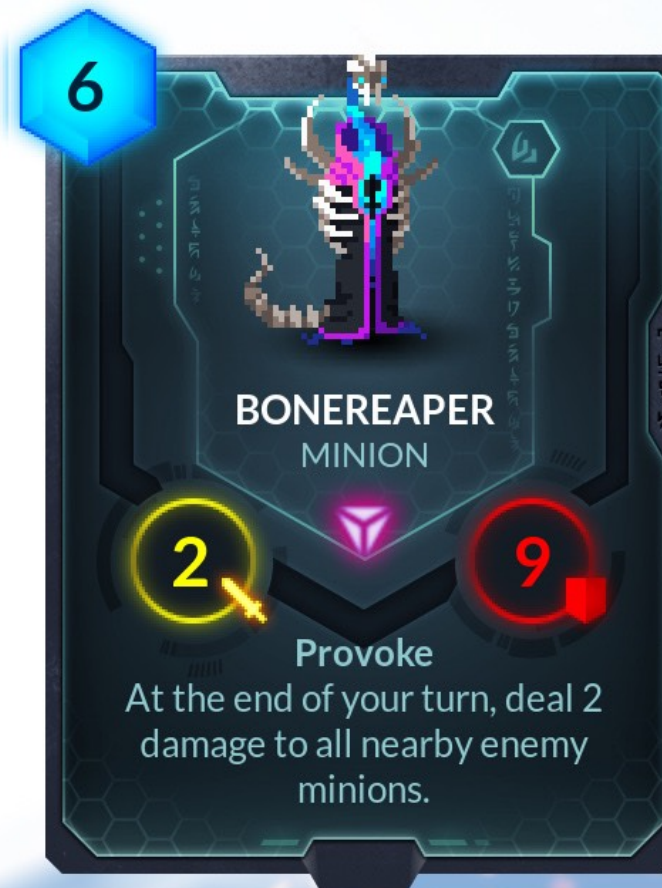
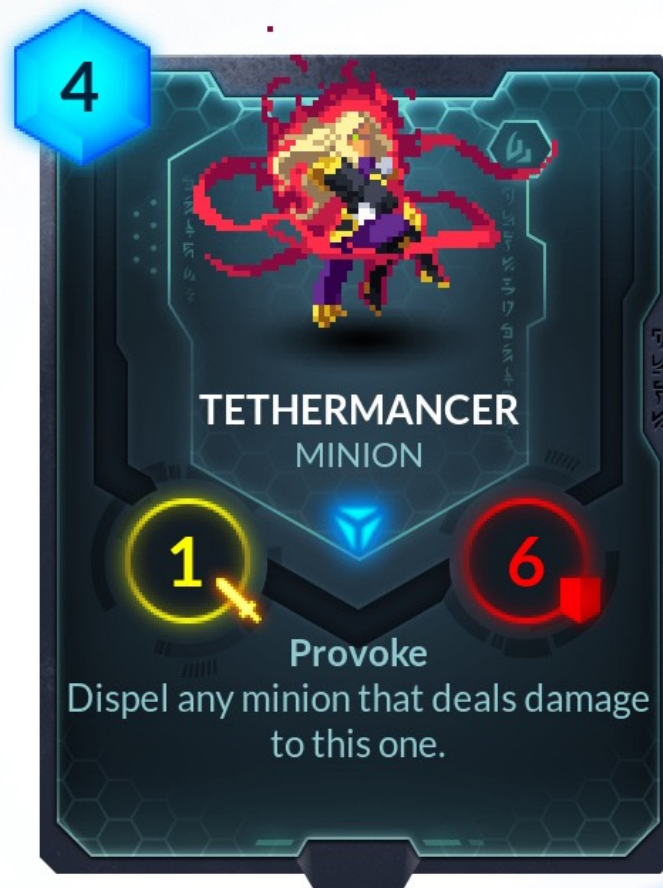
Consistency is Key: Update 55 patches in 1 year

Not tied to LCG model

Offer monthly content: cards, daily challenges, boss battles, expansions



# DUELIST







# Takeaway No.8



# #8 Create a social community atmosphere

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Availability and access to developers

Discord (real-time) vs. Reddit (daily) vs. Forums (long form)

Customer Support (24 hour grading system)

Twitter (18K followers) > Facebook (35K likes)

< 1% of your FB posts will reach your liked audience

Integrating featured steamers directly in-game

Twitch Dev Talks



# Takeaway No.9



# #9 You can't make everyone happy

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True for any design, but we never tried to

Be very clear what we're NOT

Bolster strengths, don't focus on weaknesses

Change is lightning fast to developers, but an eternity for players

2 card draw vs. single card draw, community polarized

Consistency of play (boring) vs. RNG (variety spikes, smoothes skill curve)

Chess 0.0 <—> Duelyst 0.5 <—> Higher RNG CCGs 1.0

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# Weaknesses



# Thank You

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