
Do You Have a High DQ?



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Well-Made Rules

When I was studying literature as an undergraduate, I was introduced to the 19th-century concept of the “well-made play”, crisply illustrated by the following example: *If a duelling-pistol is found in a drawer in Act I, then someone is going to be shot in Act III.*

Game rules should keep to the same principle: they should all interlock. If one rule imposes a burden, such as record-keeping or notification, there must be another rule that needs that record or notification to operate properly. Otherwise, the players are burdened to no purpose.

Any failure of the written rules of Dixonary to interlock properly with one other, or with reality, does not bother long-standing players, who play by an internalized set of rules, some of which approximate the written ones, and some of which are based on precedent that goes officially unrecorded.

Which is why some long-standing players regard close attention to the written rules as an annoying distraction from the real game.

But if a written rule does not achieve its intended purpose, I think it worthwhile to say so, and why; even if saying so annoys some players; because it may be helpful to newer players, who have only the written rules to guide them. And if that rule causes those players difficulty or puzzlement out of proportion to its benefit, I think it doubly worthwhile.

Some players maintain that you can't talk about a rule's intended purpose, because that is claiming to know what the drafters were thinking. That is not true. An author's intent can often be clearly and objectively deduced from the document itself. For example, we can confidently say that the drafters considered the situation that not all submitters would vote, because they made a special rule for when submitters do in fact all vote.

The *drafters* referred to here were Theresa Carey and Anders Sterner. We can confidently say they never imagined that they were framing rules that would endure for 20 years. Otherwise, they would not have phrased Rule 3(c) in terms of Tapcis 5 command keystrokes.

The preamble to the rules envisaged an ongoing consultative process that would resolve ambiguities and lacunae. That consultation did take place, now and then, but yielded decisions that were mainly ad-hoc, and that were never codified in the rules themselves, which is



why such a significant part of the gameplay is based today on precedent.

Rules are designed, but precedent accretes, and—unchecked by regulation and review—it can sometimes get out of hand.

Time to rein DQs in

I believe the precedent surrounding DQs has gone far beyond what the rules intended, and now needs review. DQing is often messy, it can result in unintended spoiler messages, it serves little or no purpose, and it has assumed a spurious importance in the gameplay that is simply not grounded in what the rules actually say.

In reviewing precedent, we have ample material. But we have to take the rules as they are, since we have nothing else. If that means reading three rules in conjunction, or deducing from the presence of one rule what the drafters intended in another, then that is not “playing lawyer with the rules”. That is simply making what sense of them we can, when we try to apply them to a changing game in a changing world.

DQs: what, when and why

The term *DQ* doesn't appear anywhere in the rules. But it's short for *disqualified* (though the rules themselves mostly use the word *disabled*); it gets its name from the way it appears in the rolling scores report; and it arises from Rule 6:

*If at **any** time before you vote you come, by **any** means, to know the definition of The Word, you are disqualified from voting and from offering commentary.*

The precedent

If you ask players what a DQ is for, most will say that they are a signal that the chosen word less recondite than the dealer thought: the dealer can then withdraw the word and announce a substitute.

This may come as a surprise: there is *no sanction whatever* in the rules for withdrawing a word and announcing a substitute.

Stephen Dixon was the first dealer to do this, in round 111, and it has been happening regularly ever since. I'm not saying it's a bad thing: quite the opposite. *But it isn't in the rules.*



The rules

What the rules *actually* say about DQing is quite different. Later on in rule 6, but also in Rule 3(d), they say:

If you know The Word ... you should ... inform the dealer ..., so he or she will not wait in vain for your vote.

Now first notice that the rules say not *must* or *shall* but *should* (both times). It is a recommendation, not a requirement. And why this recommendation? *So that the dealer will not wait in vain for your vote.*

What is this about *waiting in vain*?

The early-closing rule

It all revolves around Rule 8(a)(2), little-known and even less used, that says that a dealer may close the round before the voting deadline if every submitter of a definition has either voted or DQd:

Rule 8 (a): *The dealer ends the round on the earlier to occur of: (1) the arrival of the deadline for voting, or (2) **all those submitting definitions, and not disabled or excused, having voted***

For convenience, I will call this the *early-closing* rule.

The idea is that a DQ permits the dealer to invoke the early-closing rule, which he or she would not be able to do if the disqualified player (who, of course, may not vote) simply sat back and waited.

Note in passing that *waiting in vain* means needlessly waiting *until* the deadline. It does not mean waiting *beyond* the deadline in the hope of collecting additional votes.

A rare situation

There are no statistics for how often the early-closing rule is invoked. But it really is seldom. I have dealt about 70 rounds over 16 years, and I recall using it three times. In that time, I recall other dealers doing it a handful of times. Some long-standing players report never having done it even once. At best, it happens about once in two hundred rounds.

Not so very long ago, in round 1629, a player expressed surprise and chagrin that the early-closing rule was still observed. He had been playing for more than 150 rounds, or well over a year; had himself



dealt twice in that time; had never seen it done; and had wrongly concluded that the rule was a dead letter.

One reason why it is seldom invoked is that dealers, of course, set deadlines to suit their own convenience. Use of the early-closing rule reflects an unexpected change of plan.

Tactical voting is another reason. A player who is in the lead may wait until the last minute to vote, so as to be able to vote a competing definition into first place. If just one player does this, the dealer's chances of closing that round early are nil, because that player is *also* waiting for all the votes to be in.

In intention, the early-closing rule was a *good thing*. It sought to promote a pacey, reactive game, that didn't force the dealer to wait until the deadline when all of the expected votes were already in. The rule just didn't turn out useful in practice, and the game would not be much different if it weren't there.

There is nothing wrong with the early-closing rule. It has its insignificant place. I'm certainly not calling for it to be abolished.

But imagine for a moment that the early-closing rule did not exist. It is so seldom invoked that it might as well not.

And, *if it weren't there*, all that stuff in the rules about DQing could be simply deleted, because it is all there solely to support the early-closing rule. DQs govern no other rule. A player who knows the def would still be disqualified from voting, of course: but there would be no need to announce the fact.

The disadvantages of DQing

The dealer's perspective

To a dealer, DQs are a worry. It is can be difficult when a player says "I know what a *padnague* is: it's a *morwong*" but the word was in fact not *padnague*, but *padnag*. Or when a player says, "If *padnag* means *morwong*, then I'm a DQ, but otherwise I'm not." Or when a player submits a DQ along with a def, doesn't see a familiar def in the list, and votes anyway, implicitly (but *only* implicitly) countermanding the earlier DQ.

All of these situations complicate the dealer's job, make vote miscounts more likely, and above all, *contribute nothing to the course of play*: apart from the early-closing rule, which few dealers care



about, and which even they can seldom apply, a DQ has no effect on the running or the outcome or the scoring of the round.

By not DQing, a player who knows the definition *might* disadvantage the dealer who wants to close the round early; but in reality there is nearly always some other outstanding vote that would prevent this anyway, making the disadvantage largely hypothetical.

The player's perspective

There is little benefit to a *player* that DQs. Having a high DQ does not do much more than give one very limited bragging rights, in the *Knows da Woids* section of the 25-round statistics.

From the point of view of your cumulative average score, submitting a def and DQing is no different to submitting a definition but failing to vote; which is to say, it harms your average.

The rules (at 10(b)) say that submitting a def but not voting is to be discouraged, because that would be “a possible strategy” to harm your competitors' averages, by depriving them of your votes.

A possible strategy, yes. But the implication that it gives you an unfair advantage in the rolling scores is quite mistaken. As you can read in *The Statistics of Dixonary Scoring*, you *do* harm other players' averages by not voting: but in doing so you harm your own average *roughly twice as much*, by foregoing the chance of guessing correctly. So the moral argument is groundless.

Rule 10(b) says, not *You are morally obliged to do P*, but *You are morally obliged to do P because Q*. On subsequent analysis (given time the drafters lacked) it turns out that *Q* is always false, and so there is no moral obligation after all. In a sense, the rule declares itself void.

If it really were true that neglecting to vote had the effect of depressing other players' scores relative to your own, then of course recording a DQ would have merit: an excuse for what would otherwise be unfair play. This is the basis for the notion that one should DQ “for the record,” and is no doubt partly why the rules treat it at such length. And that, in turn, is probably why new players imagine it is so important to get right, and fret unnecessarily over it.

But in fact, failing to vote carries a scoring disincentive, and so needs no excuse. There is no particular need to record that a player DQd instead of waiting until the end of the round. And since there is



neither moral distinction nor scoring difference between DQing and not voting, a DQ reduces to pointless notification and recordkeeping.

What to do

If you *definitely* know the word, sitting out protects your average

If you know the word, or are pretty certain that you do, you should just sit out the round.

DQing is never required, and has the same negative effect on your average as submitting a def and not voting afterwards. So if you care about your cumulative average, you shouldn't do *either*.

You can, of course, let the dealer know that you know the word, and that if the round proceeds, you will sit out. That is not quite the same as DQing, because it doesn't harm your cumulative average, but still allows the dealer to withdraw the word.

The rules assume that you *do* care about your cumulative average. Rule 9: *In the best of all possible worlds you would consistently finish second in each round.* This world is *best* only in the sense that it is the world in which your cumulative average is higher than all the other players'.

Against this, of course, some—perhaps most—players *don't* care about their cumulative average. All having a high average does is give one limited bragging rights in *another* section of the statistics. So, if you like making up defs and don't care about your cumulative average, then go right ahead: ignore my advice and don't sit out.

But read the next paragraph anyway.

If you think you *may* know the word, wait until the vote

If you're not sure whether you know the word, it works best for you, and the dealer, if you don't DQ beforehand. Submit a def as usual. When you see the final list, if you don't recognize any of the definitions, then you didn't know the word, and you can vote. If you see from the final list that your suspicion was correct, then of course you're not allowed to vote. All you can do is DQ, or not DQ. The negative effect on your average is unavoidable, and is the same either way. Perhaps you should have thought of that beforehand and sat out the round, but it's too late now.



And what if you neglect to DQ?

If the dealer really is waiting for *just your vote* to close the round (which is less than 0.5% of the time), neglecting to DQ will keep the voting open a few hours longer, and that in turn *just might* give a player who did not submit a definition more time and opportunity to vote; though players who care about their cumulative average will not do that. And the extra time in turn *just might* affect the outcome of the game, if one of the extra votes went to the definition that was running second. And bear in mind that this effect on the outcome is one that the rules permit, since DQing *is not required*.

In summary, the rules leave it up to you whether to DQ or not. A DQ will hardly ever improve the pace of the game, as Rule 8(a)(2) intended. It doesn't attest to your moral probity, as Rule 10(b) suggests. It is supremely improbable that neglecting to DQ will affect the outcome of the game; and even if it does, that effect is allowed by the rules. In fact, a DQ serves no real purpose at all.

Go for the high DQ if you want. But don't feel obligated.

Paul Keating, The Hague, Feast of St Giles, 2010