Understanding Magic: The Gathering Commander Through Genre and Community

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In this article, Manuel Reza uses the concepts of genre and discourse communities to explore the card game Magic: The Gathering and to understand the game's Commander format.

Begin

Like many students, when I first moved to the BloNo area to attend Illinois State University (ISU), I was homesick because it was the first time I had really been away from my childhood home. I had been fortunate enough to attend a university fifteen minutes away from my house to attain my BA and MA. But for my PhD and teaching assignment, I had to move to BloNo a few weeks before my orientation to everything, and I felt alone the moment I stepped into my new apartment. In an attempt to keep my mind off missing home, I tried to keep myself occupied any way I could. *If you're thinking about something, you don't have time to miss home, right?* One of the things I used to keep my mind occupied during that time was playing MTG Arena. For the non-nerds who may not know what in the world that is, it stands for the Magic: The Gathering Arena app, which is the digital version of the popular trading card game (TCG) Magic: The Gathering. The game originated in 1993 and has been a mainstay of nerd culture since then. The app I was using to help cure my loneliness was released in 2021 and is meant to be a digital version of the game for seasoned and new players alike to enjoy for free. In the

Iterations of Magic: The Gathering (MTG) Cheat Sheet

Modalities of Playing:

MTG – The original physical card game. Players construct sixty-card decks based around certain card colors and battle with them. The goal is to reduce your opponent's life total to zero.

MTG Arena – The free-to-play app version of MTG that is meant to provide a streamlined version of MTG.

Versions of Games:

Commander – A format within the physical card game. Usually played with two or more players with 100-card decks.

Brawl – A game mode in the MTG Arena app that can be played online with others. It is meant to be similar to the Commander format in terms of rules and how it's played, but it's simplified.

original MTG card game, players construct decks featuring various creatures and spell cards to do battle against other players. I was drawn to this game because of my love for strategy and collecting cards (What can I say? I love a pretty piece of shiny cardboard).

In the time between arriving in BloNo and when I started school, I played the game religiously. In particular, I enjoyed a specific mode of MTG that the app offered: Brawl (in the nearby box is a little cheat sheet I created for those overwhelmed by the MTG terminology). This is a simplified version of MTG's popular Commander format. In Brawl, a player has a commander—a sort of boss creature—which you build your sixty-card deck around. Your deck can only have one copy of a single card, which adds to the enjoyment of the game—you have to think about what cards can come together in the best possible way to win you the game. By the time school started, I had amassed a sizable collection of digital cards, knew all the major MTG terminology, and had a Brawl deck that I enjoyed using. Eventually, my interest—well, more like obsession—with the game made me feel like it was not enough to simply interact with the cards on the screen. I loved the online Brawl deck, and it made me want to venture more into the world of tabletop MTG and build my own physical deck. There is only one problem: remember, the Brawl format does not exist in the physical card game. Brawl's equivalent in physical MTG is the Commander format. While there are similarities between the two formats, there are differences I needed to account for while adapting my online deck to the context of the physical card game. Table 1 breaks down the major differences in the two modes of gameplay that I had to account for when building my deck. It was not a simple point-A-to-point-B transfer. I found the entire process of creating my physical deck to be an **activity system** (or a series of different interactions which are done to achieve a particular goal, as explained by the ISU Writing Program) where I had to draw upon, alter, and transform my knowledge of MTG (plus, it was a wonderful excuse for buying shiny cardboard!).

First Main Phase (Or, My Starting Point)

To begin the process of building a commander deck with actual physical cards, I drew upon my antecedent knowledge of the game I gained by playing MTG Arena. **Antecedent knowledge** refers to all of the knowledge one possesses and takes with them when undertaking a new task (ISU Writing Program). When we apply antecedent knowledge to a situation, we are not directly transferring all of our prior knowledge to a new situation. Instead, we may only apply a few key pieces of knowledge which may help us accomplish this new task.

In my case, I knew the process of transferring my knowledge would involve a combination of my knowledge of each modality of MTG (the online game and the physical card game). I had to adapt my knowledge in order to do something new—to move my digital deck into the context of the physical card game. For instance, MTG Arena has a layer of automation because of its online modality. The app keeps track of variables such as the phases of the turns, life totals, creature stats, the way cards interact with each other, and it does it for the player. In the real-life card game, there is no such automation, and it is up to the player to keep track of these variables. As I took up the physical card game, I could not completely rely on my antecedent knowledge of the game I developed from the app and had to actively memorize the rules and structure of the game.

While my knowledge of the MTG Arena rules did not completely transfer to the real-life game, because of my time playing the app, I had a basic understanding of the cards and how they operate in the game. In MTG, cards could be one or a combination of five colors (red, blue, green, white, black). Cards have different styles of gameplay depending on what color they are. For instance, red cards tend to have an aggressive style of gameplay, being able to deal direct damage to players. During my time playing MTG Arena, I also familiarized myself with cards I enjoyed playing with. I enjoyed using a red, white, and green deck centered around the commander card Jetmir the Nexus of Revels (Figure 1). Through my ample playtesting, I understood that the idea behind this deck is to fill your side of

Figure 1: The Jetmir card (digital version).

Figure 2: MTG Arena Gameplay—filling up my field with creatures before playing Jetmir.

the board (or playing field) with creatures. Once you have enough creatures on the board, you place the Jetmir card into play, and its effects will add power to these creatures and give them additional abilities which allow for an aggressive barrage of attacks on your opponent (see Figure 2 for a screenshot of what this looks like in an online game). I loved this deck because when you have set up your board just right, you end up with a bunch of strong creatures that could easily win you the game. After playing with the Jetmir deck for some time, I had a sense of comfort with it and wanted to build it in real life.

Though I was not aware of it, I was actively using my antecedent knowledge to understand the general approach I wanted to take with my new deck. In my case, I was simply recalling experiences and understanding of colors and cards and whether or not I favored them—using it as a starting point for my deckbuilding. This exemplifies how our use of antecedent knowledge is not always immediately apparent. By revisiting my past experience with the game, I had a loose understanding of the game's components and what commander I want to build my deck around.

Combat (Well, More Like Research)

To start adapting my MTG Arena deck into the physical card game, I needed to understand the difference between Brawl and Commander. To do

this, I think it would be appropriate to view Commander and Brawl decks as genres. When we think about genres, the knee-jerk reaction is to think about categories to sort things (like, how with music, we have rap, pop, rock). However, we can also understand genres as social productions. **Genres** are not limited to just printed texts but can be anything which responds to a reoccurring situation and has characteristics that make it recognizable. For instance, we know a recipe is a recipe because it is responding to a situation (cooking/baking) and has characteristics which make it identifiable (measurements, list of ingredients, cooking times, instructions). It is the combination of these characteristics, or conventions, which signal to someone that they are working with a recipe.

Both Brawl and Commander format deck lists could be thought of as genres. They both respond to a situation, which is the respective game format that these decks would be used in. The deck rules for each format could be thought of as the conventions of the deck genres. Again, **genre conventions** make a thing recognizable as part of a distinct genre. I found it easiest to break down the conventions of the Brawl and commander deck lists. I then compared the conventions of each type of deck in a table (Table 1) to see their similarities and differences.

While both genres respond to similar reoccurring situations and have overlap in conventions, there are distinctions between them which make each recognizable from the other. Commander decks are certainly similar to Brawl decks in terms of the number of card copies one can use and the multiplayer nature of the format. However, that does not mean the two genres are the

Table 1: The differences in decks.

Brawl Format Deck	Similarities	Commander Format Deck
Sixty cards total (fifty-nine cards + one commander)	Only a single copy of a card is allowed in a deck	100 cards total (ninety-nine cards + one commander)
Standard and Historic variations of format affect what cards can be included in a deck	Built for a two- to four-player format	You can include any printed card from MTG's history you want in a deck (except for ones which are explicitly banned by tournament or play group)
Planeswalkers or Legendary Creatures can be commanders	Players can attack any opponent they want	Legendary Creatures and Planeswalkers with special text can be used as commanders

same because certain conventions, namely the larger size of the commander deck and the freedom/negotiation involved in the Commander format, distinguish it from Brawl deck lists. This shows how genres often rely on a specific situation and particular conventions to be considered that particular genre. These differences, though small, can cause a particular deck to be more successful in one version of the game over the other. That is, a deck may be more successful in Brawl as opposed to Commander, or vice versa.

Because of the similarities between the Brawl and commander deck lists, I found that I could actually use my Brawl deck as a base for my commander deck. I could include some of my favorite cards that I love using in MTG Arena, such as my Gala Greeters, Luxurious Libation, and Citizen's Crowbar (Figure 3). From playing MTG Arena, I know these cards have great synergy with my commander Jetmir, as they produce additional creature tokens which can be strengthened by Jetmir or create resources I could use to cast even more spells.

Though I could transfer most of my Brawl deck to its Commander counterpart, the deck size differences posed a problem for me. Since a commander deck contains more cards, I would need to add more to my Brawl deck. *But what other cards do I include?* To get an idea of how to further build my deck, I found it helpful to explore the MTG Commander Community and do some content research about it online.

Commander players could be thought of as a discourse community. A **discourse community** is a group of people who have the same goal or interest. As they interact (to achieve this goal, create things, share activities) a discourse community often develops communal practices or beliefs to

Figure 3: Some of my favorite cards.

aid their efforts. These means can be both apparent (specialized genres) or invisible (language practices). Keeping this definition in mind, MTG players could be considered discourse communities in and of themselves. For instance, they have a shared interest, playing the TCG, and have shared channels of communication (tournaments, discussion forums, etc.) that help them achieve their goal.

Interestingly enough, discourse communities are not mutually exclusive, and a discourse community can exist within an existing discourse community (I know, weird, right?). The MTG Commander playerbase can be thought of as a discourse community within the larger discourse community of MTG players. The Commander playerbase started off within a group of tournament judges who wanted to disrupt the standard way of playing MTG. They adopted a set of unique rules to add flavor to their games. Their goal was simple: use a unique play format to enjoy MTG that goes beyond the standard format of gameplay. For the most part, this goal has remained the same since the format's inception. The way you construct your commander deck may vary depending on why you want to play commander (are you a casual player or competitive player?). Since I want to play the game for fun with friends, I decided to align my deckbuilding practices with those of more casual players. To understand the casual player approach to deckbuilding, I decided to do some casual research on YouTube. I viewed some videos by well-known figures within the MTG and Commander communities.

One of these figures is the Professor, real name Brian Lewis, an English professor who runs a YouTube Channel called Tolarian Community College (TCC). He does a lot of general and specialized MTG content. A considerable amount of his content covers the Commander format. His work ranges from deckbuilding guides to Commander product reviews. One of his videos was particularly helpful in understanding the commander deckbuilding practices, entitled "The Commander Social Contract." In this video, Lewis discusses the social nature of the Commander format and the best practices for making the most out of the Commander game experience with your deck. He posits that the "fun that we have as Commander players is something that we are all responsible for helping support" through our behaviors and card choices ("The Commander Social Contract"). This assertion seems to be at the heart of the Commander community's ethics. **Ethics** can be understood as shared beliefs held by a certain group which often dictates what is considered right or wrong conduct in that group (ISU Writing Program). In the case of Commander, it is ethical to make choices which foster a fun and competitive environment. Therefore, it would be unethical to intentionally create a tedious and unengaging gameplay environment. What card factors can influence the game environment? In my

research, I found that some card choices for a commander may inhibit the interactive nature of the game.

To learn more about these controversial card choices, I turned to The Commander's Quarters YouTube Channel, an online show based around making Commander content. Specifically, I reference their video "Commander Taboos," which delves into card/deck types which are generally frowned upon in Commander. These taboos that they reference throughout the video are indicative of the unethical side of Commander gameplay. What particularly stood out to me was the general dislike of mass land destruction cards (MLD). MLD cards (such as the Armageddon card in Figure 4) destroy all players' land cards that they have accrued throughout the game. This is significant because lands are the main resources a player uses to play cards and advance the state of their board. By using MLD, that particular player is slowing the game down immensely and reducing the types of interactions that players could have with each other. Another type of deck which is not generally liked by the community are decks whose sole purpose is to give yourself additional turns. There are certain strategies in MTG which allow a player to take additional turns and limit their interaction with their opponents. While these cards and deck types can certainly be included in a commander deck, they do go against the ethics of the Community. Rather than fostering a sense of community interaction with gameplay, these cards and strategies slow down and limit the interactions between players. From my research, I learned how I did not want to build my deck.

Figure 4: Armageddon is one of the more notorious MLD cards in the MTG.

After doing my research into the Commander community, I understood that I wanted to make a deck that would not slow down the game state and instead focus on building up my own field and the creatures on it. Since I got a sense of how I did not want to build the deck from my research of the community, I decided to reference EDHREC (a website dedicated to producing Commander content, see Figure 5) to learn more about cards that I could incorporate in my own deck. Specifically, I referenced the sample deck list that the site provided for my commander. A sample deck list is a basic list of cards that players can use for a certain commander. These deck lists are meant to be a sort of starting point for players to get an idea of what cards work well with each other. The sample commander deck list lends itself to being remediated, or changed to fit a new context, by members of the Commander community. Players can take the basic list (a genre) and

remediate it to fit their needs. When we remediate a genre, we change a genre to address a new situation than its original one. As a result of these changes, the genre is able to achieve different things than it did previously. Continuing with the example of the sample deck list, it was originally meant to give players an introduction to how they are meant to play the deck. When one takes the list and adds or removes cards and makes the deck their own, they are remediating it. The remediated deck list is no longer meant to give players a sense of how it works, rather it is changed to better interact with other decks and fit players' playstyles. Through this remediation, the player is allowing the deck to have new interactions with itself and other players' decks.

Figure 5: Scan this QR code to view EDHREC and learn more about this resource.

In my own deckbuilding journey, I used the sample deck list as a jumping off point for my own deck. I wanted to incorporate the cards I am familiar with in addition to ones which would synergize with my commander (I was partial to cards that were budget friendly). In my exploration of EDHREC, I found several cards that would add consistency to my deck or support its overall playstyle—some of which are pictured below. These cards would either provide more land cards for me to use later in the game to cast spells (like Cultivate in Figure 6) or spawn creature tokens with special abilities (like Jinnie Fay, Jetmir's Second shown in Figure 7).

Figure 6: Using EDHREC was a great way to do content research about different types of cards, such as Cultivate, that work in commander decks.

Figure 7: Jinnie Fay is another card I decided to add to my deck based off my research.

Eventually, by doing enough content research about different cards, I was able to fill in the additional forty empty card slots I originally had. Then, I went to an online card vendor to purchase the single cards I needed (I totally did not spend an outrageous amount of money on cards *sweats profusely*). In the meantime, I also purchased a few booster packs to satiate my desire for physical MTG cards, which effectively started my physical collection and gave me a larger pool of cards to possibly add to the deck.

End (Or Is It?)

Once I received all of my orders, I eagerly opened the envelopes which contained the cards. I then began to construct the first iteration of my commander deck.

As you can see from Figure 8, deckbuilding can be a rather messy process—especially if you have a limited antecedent knowledge of the game like I did. You have to consider how every card supports the overall goal of your deck and do a lot of experimenting. This involves frequently swapping cards in and out, as well as doing test hands to see how your card draws might look during a game. To further see how I could improve my deck, I found that I could playtest my deck against other players to see how I can better improve the deck. In attempting to continuously fine-tune my deck, I engaged in a system of different activities. Figure 9 shows a breakdown of my deck-editing process.

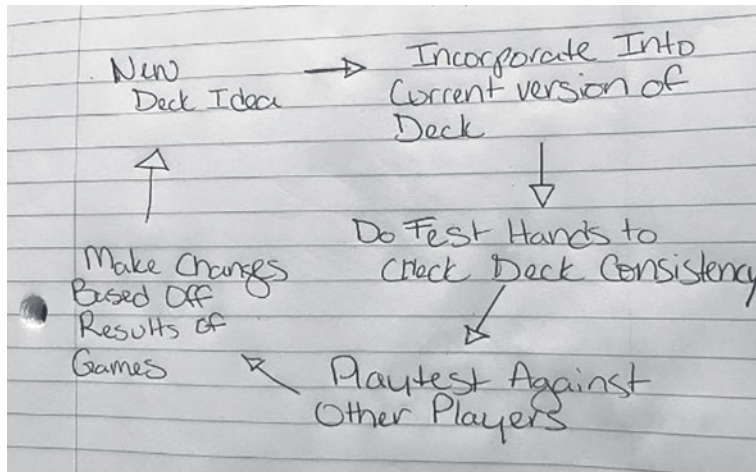**Figure 8:** Starting to sort and arrange the
cards in my deck.

Figure 9: My deck-editing process.

Deckbuilding is a process which involves a lot of trial and error. It consists of me coming up with an idea, incorporating the idea into my deck and trying it out. While I cannot say that I have built the perfect deck that I will never change, I can say that I have built a deck that is functional. It does what I want it to do, which is create lots of strong creatures to overwhelm my opponent. Because the game is constantly changing and being updated with new card sets, I will likely make changes to the deck as time passes. However, I can lean on my genre and community knowledge about Commander to make improvements and navigate the fun yet chaotic world of deckbuilding.

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