Commander/EDH

A summary written by Tyrna

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Introduction

Dear reader,

I wrote this guide for anyone interested in knowing more about the Magic format called Commander aka. Elder Dragon Highlander (EDH). The targeted group is mainly players who have built less than 4 commander decks. Seasoned players will know most the following information. I describe some basic to advanced ideas about how to build a commander deck, plan out your deck idea and what to pay attention to during your gameplay. I wrap everything up with some interesting stats that might surprise you.

I want to emphasize that you can use the provided information as you need it – skip chapters or read through everything just as you please. It is meant to be an overview for the variety of topics there are in commander, not a must-follow guide! There are many websites and videos about commander which make it easy to get overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information. Therefore I would like to present you a few tools but also advise you to use them as tools and not mindlessly copy every suggestion. All provided information is a good base to learn, but building your own version of decks will make your games way more fun.

So I hope you have fun with this script and you find it helpful building/playing commander decks! I would appreciate getting feedback. ;)

Deck Building

Choosing your commander/deck theme

When choosing which deck you want to build you have three choices. You can either start with a commander (legendary creature, in some cases a planeswalker which can be a commander), look for a certain deck theme or a specific color combination. The website edhrec.com gives you a good overview of all commanders in every color combination, as well as popular deck themes and their most used commanders. When you have chosen your commander, the website shows you the most played cards in decks with that commander. You can even choose the theme you want to play and get specific suggestions.

A deck can be built in many different ways. The EDH format gives you the advantage of having permanent access to 1 - 2 legendary creatures/planeswalker (each deck consists of 1 commander and 99 cards or 2 partner commanders and 98 cards). Building your deck around your commander being the key piece of your strategy is therefore very effective. But how do you choose your commander? First of

all be aware that the higher the mana cost of a commander the later he will come into play. His power is not necessarily reflected in his mana cost, as the strongest decks have commanders with mana costs of 2 - 5. Second of all, think about what role he should fulfill: is he being your win condition, your value engine or card draw engine? The Tolarian Community College has short old video on this. The decision you make often depends on your deck's theme and (arche-)type.

In Magic, decks are often categorized into 3 **deck archetypes**: aggro, control and midrange.

Aggro is a term for an aggressive deck which attempts to win the game through persistent, quick damage dealing (mtg.gamepedia.com). These decks normally use hard hitting creatures and sometimes direct damage spells. This archetype is very effective in many 1v1 Magic formats as it tries to end the game very fast. But as Commander/EDH is a multiplayer format with often longer games, it tends to be more difficult to win with aggro decks than with midrange or control decks as those out value aggro decks in the mid to later stages of the game. To win with an aggro deck you should focus down one opponent after another, starting with the one with the most board wipes/the hardest control or combo deck (Aggro guide in Command Zone Episode 296).

Control decks aim to control the opponent's cards and progression while building up card advantage. They are defensive and reactive by nature. Control decks delay the game until their win condition comes online by drawing many cards and eliminate enemies' threats. These win conditions are normally either combos (nearly instantly game winning card combinations) or consist of some aggro elements. Control decks don't have to be counter spell centric as some other examples for control decks are: land destruction decks (white and/or red), stax decks (restricting your ability to play e.g. through limiting your untap phase, various colors) and hand disruption decks (typically using black).

Midrange decks use a mixture of aggro and control. They can choose to use bigger creatures to attack efficiently but while also controlling the game in some other aspects. Midrange decks big advantage lies in their flexibility, adapting to either the aggro or control role during a game (for more detailed information see section Gameplay), despite not being as good in playing aggressive as aggro decks or pure control as control decks.

Your game strategy is set by your **deck theme** which describes how you want to generate value in your game and work towards winning. The themes range from:

- Card type (artifact, enchantment, equipment, land, planeswalker, spellslinger, token, … decks)
- Creature type (deathtouch, defender, eldrazi, elf, goblin, morph, zombie, … decks)
- Mechanic type (cycling, discard, mill, pod, polymorph, reanimator, self-mill, wheel, … decks)
- Strategy type (big mana, burn, chaos, group hug, infect, lifegain, storm, voltron, … decks)

For a more detailed list, visit edhrec.com/themes. Of course some strategies are more effective in multiplayer/commander than others. Still most strategies can compete with each other, trying to exploit the weaknesses of each opposing deck theme. Think of it like a big rock, paper, scissors game with not 3 but tons of available elements. So if you like a specific card or mechanic there probably is a way to build a deck around it! (It doesn't have to be a commander or a deck playing around your commander) So what's fun for you? Sneaking in big mana spells for value, wanting your deck to go off (regardless of it

wins you the game or not), wanting your opponents to slowly die through their own cards, run at your opponents or just lay back as the invisible player? Show it to us …

Side note: the more specific a deck theme is, the less card choices you normally have got. Sometimes super specific decks may feel like "not your own" idea/deck.

Average deck stats

When building your deck you want it to run smoothly. The following data is a reference for how many cards of each functional type you should try to have at least in your deck for it to be nicely balanced. Side note: Control decks often run more removal, board wipes and card draw cards than aggro decks. There also is the older episode 151 of Command Zone talking in detail about how to build a commander deck.

Land cards:	36 - 38
Ramp cards:	10
Card draw cards:	10
Single target removal:	7 - 8
Board wipes:	5
Synergy cards:	30 - 35

- Depending on your average mana cost of cards (also see topic mana curve) you can run even less than 36 **lands** but in most cases it's not recommendable. Having less can lead to more games with the un-enjoyable experience of being mana screwed and not really participating in a game. Decks playing around lands (like land matters decks, for example landfall decks) should see lands as an even more important resource, playing 40 to 45 lands. More than 45 lands could hinder more than help you. Having utility lands is great but be careful as many come at the cost of not giving any (colored) mana which might cause problems especially in 3+ colored decks. Non-basic land hate is a thing in commander so try to always include at least 10 - 12 basic lands in every deck. In multicolored decks it's strongly recommended to use lands that can generate mana of different colors. Fetch lands are useful to fix your mana (search for a land of a color you currently need). In combination with recurring lands from the graveyard you can generate tons of value with fetch lands.
- **Ramp**ing means that you create a situation where you have got more mana available than you would have when only putting one land into play in each of your turns and therefore accelerates your game. It's typically done by putting extra lands into play or playing artifacts/creatures that tap for mana. But there are also for example one time spells or abilities that generate a larger amount of mana. Ramping with lands is usually the safest way as they most likely won't get removed. When choosing the mana cost of your ramp spells try to think about your general plan:

a deck relying on casting their commander as early as possible wants for e.g. a 4 mana commander ramp cards costing only 1 - 2 mana to play the commander on turn 3, for a 5 mana commander ramp cards up to 3 mana cost. It is wise to use low mana ramp spells because you want to play spell that advance your strategy on turns 4 - 6.

- For **card draw** you usually want a mixture of cards that have *repeatable* effects (triggering multiple times/drawing over time) and *burst* card draw (drawing 3+ cards immediately). Repeatable card draw is good to have in early to mid game to constantly have enough cards in your hand. Burst card draw is great in mid to late game to recover fast after board wipes or search for a card you need while the game will end soon and repeatable card draw doesn't pay off anymore. Be careful with counting cards that only draw one card as card draw (and therefore only replacing itself aka. cantrip) as you normally want to get **card advantage** from drawing cards. Card advantage means on the one side being up cards compared to how many you would normally have available at that moment (for example 1 card letting you draw 2+ cards), but on the other side also compared to how many cards your opponents would have available normally (like a board wipe destroying 2+ creatures from enemies or a removal spell killing a creature that has enchantments attached to it -> 1 for 2+ card trades). For a detailed card draw guide watch Command Zone Episode 343.

- **Single target removal** spells or abilities are normally dealing damage, destroying, exiling or countering single cards that pose a threat to you or your decks plan. Other methods of removal are for example returning permanents to their hands or even shuffling them into their library (aka. tucking). As you want to prevent these threatening cards to deal any harm to you or don't want that your enemies protect these cards, timing your removal is crucial. If cast in the right moment you can not only dispose of the threat but also disrupt further plans. That's achieved when you cast it as they want to take advantage of it through playing another card or in reaction to them protecting the card. This means that removal spells should almost always be at instant speed. Split second spells even prevent enemies from reacting with instants or abilities. Try to have different styles of removal (exile effects are not that widely spread but can sometimes be the only solution) and removal for different card types, which makes flexible removal very strong. Generally you want removal cards to cost 1 - 2, at maximum 3 mana to cast because that is the amount of mana you have to hold up and cannot use during your turn to build up your board state.

- **Board wipes** are mass removal cards. Therefore destroying, exiling, returning to the owners hand and dealing damage to multiple cards fulfill that purpose. For board wipes there is the similar idea of you wanting them to be either flexible (able to wipe multiple or specific card types of your choice) and/or "cheap" (preferably 4 - 5 mana, 6 or 7 mana cost board wipes should have special benefits). Don't forget to have board wipes for different card types. The basic problem for the one casting board wipes is that this player is normally the last one to rebuild after the board wipe as they are expensive sorcery spells. Therefore playing one sided board wipes (not affecting yourself, so only your opponents) is a good way to play around that issue. Of course there are the few board wipes which can do that on their own but there are many other board wipes which can synergize well with your deck plan and therefore become (nearly) one sided (e.g. only hitting big creatures …). Another route is having instant speed board wipes which you

can cast right before it's your turn. Side note: there are a few great protection spells that prevent board wipes to affect your board or get back wiped cards - you can let other players do the work for you or even capitalize on it!

- **Synergy** is the overall network of card interactions within parts of your deck (mtg.gamepedia.com). A synergistic deck is one where every card benefits from every other card in some way. A well-built deck contains at least 25 cards which synergize directly with your strategy/theme. A number of 30 - 35 synergy cards is great but also not always that easy to achieve without neglecting card draw, ramp, lands or removal. For specific decks one of these categories actually are synergy cards. When powering up your deck is putting in expensive (€) powerful unsynergistic cards often less impactful than cheap synergistic ones. Side note: Be careful with the synergy rating on [EDHrec](), it only describes how uniquely a card is used for a specific deck, not how good its synergy is or how strong it plays out in this deck.

Power level

When playing a game of commander everyone wants to enjoy a fun game. One important step is to know what each player thinks is "fun" in Magic. This often reflects in their deck's strategy and strength. A commander deck built out of a person's first 500 random cards has another approach to the game than a well-tuned focused deck or an absolutely maximized competitive EDH (called cEDH) deck. Therefore several attempts were made to rank decks (for example on a scale from 1 to 10). Its goal is to prevent from having games that are not fun because a top tier deck (8+ on the scale) just destroys a newly built deck (for example a 2 - 5 on this scale) leading to bad blood in a play group. In the following part I present the power level list I liked most, which is from the Magicfest Reno, presented and commented on this EDHrec [episode]() (I also used [Command Zone Episode 295]() and [Episode 217]() for the following). Those rankings are not exact, it's more to give you an approximate tier for your current deck or maybe the power level you want to get to.

1 - 2 Jank   Themed decks that are more interested in having fun than winning

- For example storytelling decks, theme guessing decks … (where some them don't even have win conditions -> 1) or "every card art has a hat" tribal, completely un-themed/-synergistic thrown together decks (but can win when all stars align -> 2).

3 - 4 Casual   Trying to win but with limited resources

- For example weak tribal decks (goat tribal) or pre-cons (the pre-constructed commander decks which are released every year, 10 - 15 off-theme cards -> 3) to slightly upgraded pre-cons (taken out off-theme cards -> 4), still low on interactions, low card draw, inefficient ramp (so doesn't fulfill the recommended averages) and synergy as well as a mana curve which isn't thought out.

5 - 6   Focused   Powerful card interactions but no or few combos

- Especially higher synergy, good efficiency, more interactions. Still there are several suboptimal cards in these decks. When implementing the numbers from average deck stats to your deck you normally land in this category. First thoughts about mana curve have been made. These decks don't run tutors/combos (-> 5) or maximally like 1 - 2 (-> 6). Some deck themes often cap out here (e.g. mill, group hug, voltron, Boros (red-white) … decks).

7 - 8   Optimized   Lots of infinite/game ending combos and many powerful cards

- Very efficient mana curves and bases, normally no suboptimal cards anymore. A lot of board interactions. Many tutors making the decks very consistent. They play very efficient and powerful commanders/strategies but not the very best ones. Cards like mass land destruction or stax strategies start showing up. No matter how much you want to power up most decks, they will probably reach this level at most.

**9 - 10 Competitive**   Decks pushed to the absolute limit, using the very best cards and winning fast

- So called cEDH only uses the most powerful (specific) commanders and strategies that end the game super fast. It's more the question whether its turn 1 - 4 (-> 10) or 4 - 6 (-> 9). Typical themes are combos, storm decks (it's like combo) or stax decks. These decks often have fewer lands but many ramp cards. Some of these decks don't even need their commander, they just need a 5 colored commander in the command zone to get access to all cards and never play their commander. Politics are not really a thing in this category.

- As rule of thumb: the higher you go in power level, the fewer creatures are played.
- In my opinion decks in a range of 2 power level can compete with another. Command Zone and EDHrec even talk about a range of 3 power levels but at least from my experience I don't think it's a really fair game being apart 3 or more power levels.
- Those numbers only reflect the deck's power level. A deck maneuvered by differently experienced players will have an impact on how strong the deck actually plays out. Sometimes you also might purposely play a deck not to its fullest potential for example against weaker opponents.
- How resilient/fragile a deck's strategy is might also play a role.
- Most people tend to underrate their own decks slightly rather than overrate them, especially because they are the person to exactly know the decks' weaknesses (normally misjudge by only 1 power level but you should keep that in mind).

A further metric to **determine the power level** of a deck (in addition to what is mentioned above) is after how many turns the deck can **consistently** (threaten to) win games uninterruptedly (from that point on the game might continue but it's already decided, the numbers for power levels below 7 are more vague):

Power level	**10**	Turn 1 - 4
	9	Turn 4 - 6
	8	Turn 7 - 8
	7	Turn 9 - 10
	6	Turn 11 - 12
	5	Turn 13 - 14
	4	Turn 15+

- Upping the table's power level will shorten the average game length. If you're thinking that your games take too long, then improving your deck might be the way. Then everyone gets another shot in a new game.

To get an idea about the general power level distribution in commander, the **average** estimated **power level**s of over 600 games were evaluated on one of the first Commandfest:
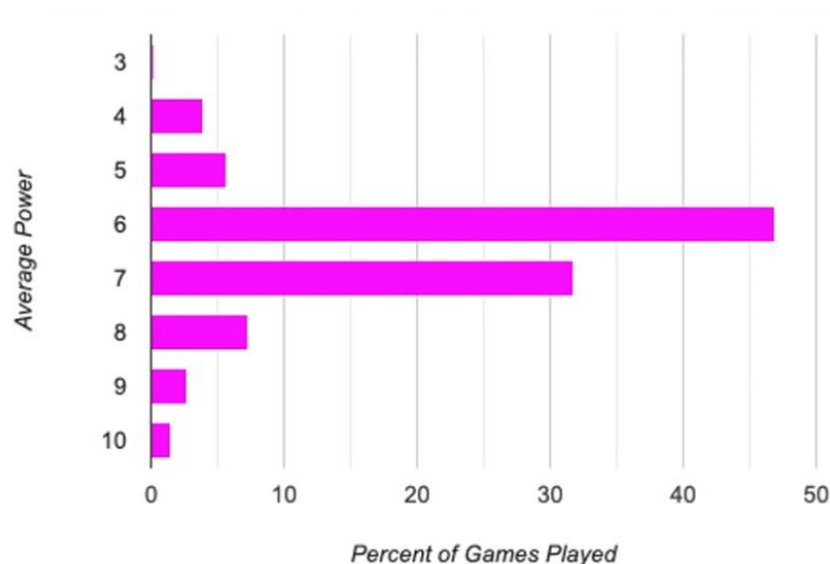
- 2% of games were with average power level of 1 - 2. This diagram shows the approximate distribution of commander game strength.
- Still, adding up the number of games in power level 1, 2, 3, 9 and 10 doesn't even reach 10% of all games played on this event while representing 50% of all power level categories, so a "better" defined ranking system should come out over the next years.

Power up and optimize your deck

Powering up your deck means improving your current deck strategy to make it work better and/or faster. Changing your commander or strategy won't be a topic in this script. That's also part of the reason why I won't write about upgrading to decks of power level 9 or 10. First of all you should think about the average power level of your playgroup, the power level you currently play and which one you want to reach with your deck. The reason is that depending on that fact, you have a different amount of time/turns to deploy cards or strategies.

The first step is to clarify your **deck**'s **theme**. Some thrown together Jank (lvl 2) decks don't have a dedicated theme/strategy they want to play out. If you want to upgrade your lvl 1 or 2 deck to a 3+ and you don't know which themes exist, read the section "deck themes" above. Casual decks (lvl 3 - 4) often have several cards which don't fit their theme. That's totally fine in this range if you purposely put in off-themed flavor cards. But one reason that keeps decks in the range of power level 3 - 5 is that too many themes are implemented in one deck. The more effective decks only play 1, at most 2 themes that synergize well with each other to play out their strategy. For example a deck already playing a discard and sacrifice theme will have problems to also implement an effective voltron theme. There are only 100 cards in a commander deck of which 10 should be ramp, 37 lands, some non-synergizing removal/board wipes … leaves about 30 - 40 cards for the actual cards you want to play. So when only every 3rd card sets up one strategy, then playing 2 different strategies in one deck becomes a big slow down factor.

When **adding new cards** to your deck, synergistic cards will make your deck stronger than just powerful cards that have no deck synergy. A good example for that are elf tribal decks where most synergistic cards are common creatures and adding another synergistic common elf is way more effective than a powerful card that only generates value but doesn't help your strategy. On top of that, these single powerful cards quickly make you the target of most opponents while not helping you as effectively as the opponents might think. The same is true for expensive (€) cards. Depending on your playgroups power level (so the amount of turns until the game ends) you actually benefit more from 30 cent Scry-(dual)lands in slower games than from 150+ € original dual lands, so don't overvalue expensive cards just for their price.

Focus on cards that support your main strategy and not only synergize with a few cards in your deck. When you choose which cards to add, think about how many turns the game will probably go on after you play them. So for power levels 7 or below that means especially recurring value is important (repeatable effects that pay off after a few turns) as the game will drag out. If you don't get punished for playing greedy cards you can gain a big advantage (greedy cards are expensive mana cost wise which set you up for next turns if not removed/stopped). To search for cards I use Scryfall of which the advanced filter is particularly useful to find whatever you need. The website I plan out and build decks on is Tappedout. On Tappedout you have to add every card one by one to your deck (I recommend setting up the deck and adding cards with the live edit option) but it provides you with tons of information that make it way easier to build your mana base and mana curve.

Another important aspect to consider when choosing cards is to think about how good the card plays out when you are ahead or behind in the game. You should tend way more often towards the cards that are good when you are behind as in a 4 Player game there normally is only 1 player ahead, the rest are behind.

The second step and one of the most important topics is looking at your deck's mana base. The fun part in Magic starts with playing spells. Improving you **mana base** is crucial for you having the right mana to play the cards you want to play in multicolored decks. The classical way to achieve a **basic** mana base is to count and add together all colored mana symbols on your decks' spells (spells are all cards apart from lands) for each color separately (So a card with mana cost 4RRR, the RRR counts as 3 red mana, added with 1R that's 4 and so on). The relative amount of each color's mana symbols should match the relative amount of mana in your lands/mana rocks (artifacts tapping for mana). So for example in a 3 colored deck with 40 lands when you have got 30 red (R), 30 black (B) and 40 blue (U) mana symbols, 12 lands should be mountains, 12 swamps and 16 islands. But as only having 12 cards from 100 giving you red or blue mana is not a good rate for giving you a red and a blue mana by, let's say, turn 4 because your commander costs 1RBU (4 converted mana cost: 1 colorless, 1 red, 1 black, 1 blue) you should up the chance of having each color produced to around 18/100 or 20/100 (so 20 cards from your 100). You achieve this by adding cards/lands that can produce mana of more than one color. As it's not that convenient to count all mana symbols on spells, calculate the right percentages, you often have around 37 lands and 5 mana artifacts from which 8 tap for colorless mana, 8 dual lands, 2 triple lands, 4 all color sources …, especially each time you change several cards in your deck, websites like Tappedout take away that work from you.

For a really **good** mana base you also have to take into account at which point of the game you need which color more than others. That especially affects your early game as you will probably have each color available after turn 6 with a basic mana base. For example like in the adjacent figure of my Atraxa deck's mana base (from Tappedout) you can see that the amount of mana symbols (outer ring of colors) doesn't match exactly the available amount of colored mana from my lands/artifacts (inner color pie). That has multiple reasons:
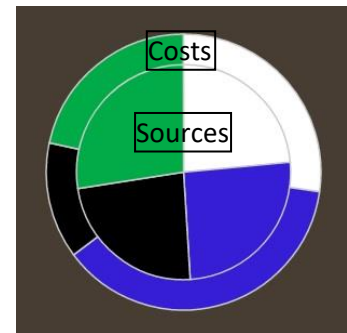
- The commander Atraxa costs 4 mana (WUBG), so I need a rather balanced mana base to being able to play her at turn 4.
- I need the green mana early for ramp spells to accelerate my game (that's true for most decks that play the color green, keep that in mind). I'll always mulligan (redraw cards at the beginning of the game) until I have a green mana source on my hand.
- Most blue spells in this deck want to be played after my commander is on the battlefield. Therefore I can have less blue mana sources because I will have enough of them at turn 4 or 5+ when I need it.

So you have to adjust according to your deck's plan. Also when choosing cards to play in 3+ colored decks it's often difficult or even unwise to play cards with 3+ mana symbols of one color on a card, especially if you want to play it in early to midgame.

The third and probably most important step is adjusting your decks **mana curve**. The basic idea of Magic as a strategic game about resources is that the player who spends the most mana generally wins. Therefore the higher the power level of a deck, the more efficient it plays out, having (more) cards to play in earlier turns. In an average commander deck you should aim for a distribution of spell mana costs like a bell curve with the peak being at 3 converted mana cost (CMC). The adjacent example is a bit extreme but you get the idea. You should also count in your commander as a spell always ready to cast and therefore have less cards with that many CMC. So this mana curve would be good in a deck with a commander with CMC of 4.
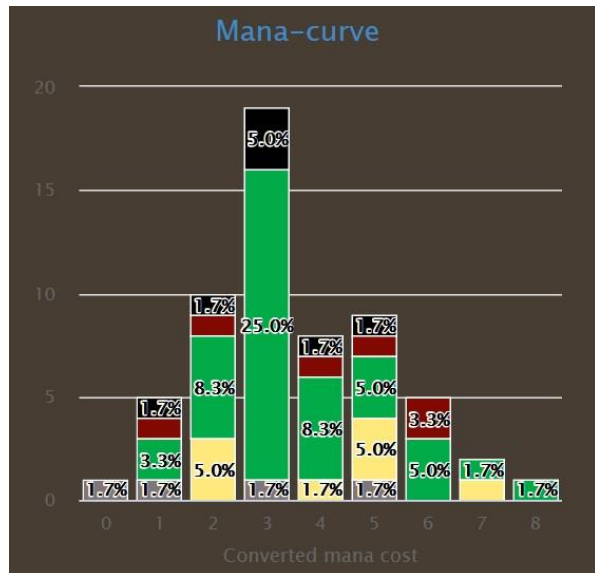
When your bell curve peaks at 3 CMC it's also the first step towards no playing too many expensive spells. Generally, the higher the mana cost of a spell, the more powerful it is. The idea behind this mana cost distribution is that you want to have enough 1 and 2 mana cost cards to play something in the first turns (usually ramp spells or efficient permanents). 3 mana cost spells often have good effectiveness and can be played on a later turn while having mana up for removal spells. The really big expensive spells of 6+ mana cost are those everyone dreams of playing. But they come with a big cost: having mana up afterwards for removal is often difficult, removal and counter spells are more effective against single big cards than multiple smaller ones. Furthermore, spells with 6+ mana cost are dead cards in your hand for the first 5 turns. Therefore the rule of thumb is that the more powerful a deck is, the less high mana cost spells it plays and the lower its average mana cost is. *Lowering the average mana cost in a deck is a very effective way of powering up a deck.* Normally you should aim for having about 5 cards with CMC 6+ but for example power lvl 7 - 8 decks have 0 - 5 of them (to hard cast, cheating out spells is not considered here). As the games on that level are shorter there is less time to ramp to such high mana and play multiple cards with CMC 6+. And if they are played they have to be so good, that they directly set you up to win the game. Because these high CMC cards are so powerful, you want them to have an immediate impact, to not just get removed without having an effect. Greedy cards that don't have an immediate effect are risky, but can pay off in a slow meta game. Find your line of greed by trying it out.

This game is all about you and your friends/playing partners having fun. So help them have fun and it will probably also lead to a more enjoyable experience for everyone including yourself. To introduce yourself or your (new) deck you can tell to the others which your favorite card is in the deck and also ask them about theirs. It doesn't only reflect a bit the reason for why you built your deck in a specific way but also appreciates your mates' interest and decks. That probably also clarifies what to expect from your opponents decks and how your game plan should look like.

Gameplay

This section revolves around playing out the strength of your deck and improving your gameplay. The probably most important question in this context is: What do you want from your game? Win at all cost, learn from your mistakes every game, combo off or just try out different cards in your deck or maybe manipulate your opponents?

In a 4 player game with even chances, each player should win 25% of his games. Yes, that means you lose 3 out of 4 games. So ask yourself the following question: How often would you like to win? You could not care whether you win or not and play for fun, looking to play a specific card or only be satisfied doing your "thing" in a game. Aiming to win 30+ % of your games is also a good motivation, but be aware that winning at all cost might hurt you more than help you. Every player considers something else as a **No-Go** which can turn their or (because of that) your game into an unpleasant experience, so try to communicate well in your playgroup to prevent that. Examples for No-Go's can be:

- Taking real life grudges into the game.
- Taking a grudge from one game to another game (even on another day).
- Breaking promises during the game.
- Bending rules to the detriment of specific players (like switching from relaxed to strict rule interpretation in the middle of a game).
- Cards that have effects that the player actually doesn't need in his strategy but change the game significantly (stax cards, chaos cards, giving mana/lands/cards to all players)
- Specific game strategies (e.g. stax, mass land destruction, …)

If you want to improve your winning percentage think of the following rule: The player in the lead normally is the arch enemy which lowers his chances to win drastically as playing 1 vs. 3 is very difficult. Even if you are not the first but the second one to be the arch enemy it won't favor you winning. The best chance has the one being in second place over the biggest period of the game. Therefore prioritize playing so that you don't die and keep off the radar as your opponents will knock out each other and you can sneak in a win.

Playing out your deck's plan

In one of the first topics of this script I presented to you the different archetypes in Magic. The first thing to try figure out in a game is what the aggro, midrange and control decks are. As stated in the famous [Who's the beatdown?](#) article it is important to know which deck leans the most into aggro or control because they target each other. Your basic strategy should be looking for the deck(s) which will prevent you from playing out your deck strategy and neutralize it (them) first. The hardest control deck wants to drag out the game as its winning chances grow the longer the game goes. Aggro decks want to prevent such long games and as control decks use many delay tactics (board wipes, counter spells …) aggro decks

go after them first. The more difficult part is when multiple control or midrange decks face each other. Midrange decks can play more the aggro style when facing control or other midrange decks that will out value it in the long run. But control decks also have to when losing out in the late game, even though they are not built to do it. Recognizing when to play more aggressive or defensive is important, because that is still what decides many Magic games up to the highest competition level.

Starting hand: which one should you keep?

- Apart from having enough lands (3 - 4 lands are ideal, 2 lands only is risky depending on the other cards in your hand, 5+ lands often means you probably won't be able to build up your board early), ramp cards are good but card draw in your starting hand is even better to keep getting lands and build up your game (changes of course if your commander is your card draw engine).
- You probably shouldn't keep hands with 1 land, regardless of the other cards. Of course, the other 6 cards look tempting, because it's what you want to play. But you probably won't be able to with 1 land. Also cards like Brainstorm or Sensei's Divining Top are no real card draw, so be careful banking on only those, too.
- Remember: Commander games tend to be long and therefore starting with a bad hand can make you have a suboptimal/bad game experience which drags out for 1 - 2 hours.

In Commander, it often is a race to having 9 or more **mana** first to cast game ending spells. This is said because of the green sorcery card "Tooth and Nail" (with entwine cost paid it has a total cost of 9 mana) which allows you to put in play 2 creatures of your choice out of your library and combo win that way. In the meantime newer cards like "Expropriate" (also 9 mana) stand for the same idea. Basically you reached critical mass to win the game. Leading there you want to build up your board correctly which means always prioritizing ramp spells over anything else in the first turns (if available) to have more explosive turns later. Try to play as efficient as possible so that when in doubt, play 1 high CMC spell instead of 2 low CMC spells if you think you can get away with it. Playing a big spell instead of multiple smaller ones means that you are more flexible in the later turns and it will set you up for the win. That's because stacking/playing multiple cards after another (about 3 - 4 spells/abilities, during your turn or including the end step of the player right before your turn) without your opponents doing something often brings you into a game winning position, so play explosively. But be careful which cards you play out just because you can: playing threatening cards too early (e.g. cards that are crucial for you) just because you can but don't use immediately often backfires and get removed/make you the target.

Threat assessment

Threats are cards (or players) that can make you lose the game or counter your strategy. Of course every **card** your opponents play, normally poses a bigger or lesser threat to you. But you will never be able to remove every card your opponents play out. So ideally, you only want to remove that one card which combines all the pieces in their deck to maximize you removal. Therefore try to understand what your

opponents' deck strategies are and you will soon understand which cards are crucial to them. Those are typically unique cards or abilities, which can also be combo pieces. Many decks use their commander to fulfill this role as their deck's centerpiece. But don't shy away from removing enemy commanders because it often sets them back more than you think, as commanders don't get cast as often as you think they will (see section Statistics). I'd also like to encourage you to try out other peoples' decks in order to get to know other archetypes/themes, what makes them strong and also their weaknesses. It allows you to learn how to build decks differently or play around certain aspects of the game, as well as improve your threat assessment drastically. For more information, check out the video from EDHrec on this topic.

When looking for a **player** being the threat for you, think about the following points:

- Who's the beatdown? Who benefits most from a long game? If you haven't got the strongest control deck, that one is your target. If you play the strongest control deck, focus on removing/countering the biggest threats.
- Who has got the most mana available? On average, whoever spends the most mana per game wins the game.
- Who started the game? That player often has a big advantage for having more mana and cards first, don't underestimate that (see section Statistics)!
- Did someone draw many cards in the last 1 - 2 turns? He probably will play very explosively in the next turns!

Threats are also dependent on the colors they are played in. The following are examples for when a deck in that **color** likely is a bigger threat than in other colors:

- A **white** deck that has big setup enchantments on the battlefield.
- A **blue** deck that has many cards in hand.
- A **black** deck that has a high life total and is using life as a resource.
- A **red** deck that has many tokens/creatures on the battlefield.
- A **green** deck that has many creatures or 1 very big creature on the battlefield.

Sometimes you don't have to remove your opponents' threats if they are attacking/targeting another opponent with it. Keep your removal until the last moment possible, you can gain additional information or value doing that. Also don't forget to use your life total as a resource in the way that taking a hit can make you look like less of a threat and you can use your removal for a bigger threat later.

Try to stay objective when making your threat assessment. Targeting a player only because he did something to you in the last game or overreacting out of revenge after a small attack at game start will probably lead to your loss. If you cannot deal with certain cards/abilities of a player there are still 2 possibilities:

- Player removal (knocking out the threatening player).
- Politicking, so asking for other players help in exchange for something else.

Politics

In multiplayer games like Commander you should not only consider the resources you have got available, but also those your opponents have. To use your opponents' resources to your advantage you can ask your opponents help you in exchange for a favor. Be careful when negotiating a deal to not overdo it in the number of requests for deals or the size of the deals. Try to always add a time condition (for X turns …). Also don't accept every offer, as the deal normally favors the proposing person. Either decline it or ask for more (if you are in the position to do it), normally they will accept. An in-depth video I used for this topic is the Command Zone Episode 209.

To **start a deal**, be it a trade, pact or alliance, there are a few approaches like:

- Pointing out a threat on the table like "This is a combo piece.", "I can't deal with that!" or "Who do you attack with this?"
- Offering an interactions like the removal of a threat/attacking creature.

Your incentive to make a deal with someone can be to either protect your flank when you are ahead/2nd so that you can attack your current threat without being flanked or just to create a good will with an opponent so that he ideally repays you later in the game or even in following games. Being in a strong position (like when you have something other players want you to do or you have a threat on board) can be great to start politicking, like to assure certain players they won't be targeted and to gain additional value.

There are some further things to **pay attention** to when acting/politicking in a game:

- Angering multiple players makes you the arch enemy. Playing as if you were the police also falls into this category, try to only answer big threats towards yourself or if it's a threat to the whole table, try to get some concessions from your opponents you helped out with it. If the threat consists out of multiple cards, get other players to help you remove them.
- Angering the "wrong player" that you can't handle can deteriorate your winning chances very fast. Trying to stop the arch enemy alone can make you his target.
- The "wrong player" could also be the person who overreacts to everything another player does to him. Still focus that opponent if he's the one that is your biggest threat.
- Not politicking means that you are losing out in this part. Politics are always a part of multiplayer games whether you like it or not. Use it to your advantage.

Mechanics

There are many complicated rules in Magic that are even more important to know when playing a multiplayer game like Commander. Each player's turn consists out of 5 phases with some being divided up into multiple steps. Not only can certain abilities or spells only be used/cast in some of these steps, but there is also the order in which players are allowed to use/cast them (if you want to play a card that uses the stack it means casting a spell). That's the so called **priority** system in which the player, whose turn it currently is, is allowed to use abilities/cast spells first, then the priority is given around the table clock-wise. The player currently holding priority is allowed to play cards until he chooses to pass priority to the next player. Whenever a player uses abilities/cast spells they are put on the **stack**. The stack is a game zone that describes the order in which multiple abilities/spells were played and that are waiting to resolve. The stack builds from the bottom upwards and the abilities/spells are then resolved from the top downwards. In multiplayer like Commander that also means, that the first player can put abilities/spells on the stack, then passes priority and gives every player (clock-wise) the opportunity to react to his actions through putting abilities/spells on the stack themselves until no one wants to add anything. Then the stacks' abilities/spells are resolved one by one, starting with the last one put on the stack. After every ability/spell that resolves each player again gains priority (clock-wise) to put other abilities/spells on top of the stack, starting with the player whose ability/spell resolved. This procedure is repeated until the stack is empty. Actions that are not put on the stack are turn-based actions (see below) or special actions (playing a land, tapping a permanent or exiling a card with its suspend ability).

Examples for how the stack works:

1. Example: A player uses an ability to deal 2 damage to an opponent's 1/1 creature. That opponent gets priority before the damage resolves and casts a spell to give that creature +3/+3. As the strengthening happened last it is on top of the stack and triggers first. Then the 2 damage resolve and the (now 4/4) creature survives that damage instance.
2. Example: At the beginning of a player's upkeep each player has got an ability trigger. The ability of the player whose turn it is goes onto the stack first, followed by each other players trigger (clock-wise). We assume that no player wants to add an ability/card to the stack. Therefore the last player's trigger will resolve first as it is the last to be added (is on top of the stack) and (if nothing interferes) the triggers are resolved "counter clock-wise".

The **turn structure** in Magic:

- Beginning phase
    - Untap step
    - Upkeep step
    - Draw step
- Pre-combat main phase
- Combat phase
    - Beginning of combat step
    - Declare attackers step
    - Declare blockers step
    - Combat damage step
      (A second combat damage step is generated if there is a first or double strike creature)
    - End of combat step
- Post-combat main phase
- Ending phase
    - End step
    - Cleanup step

When all players pass priority in succession and the stack is empty, a phase or step ends. I won't discuss the turn structure in-depth (for a detailed version see MTG Wiki) but I want to point out specific steps and their turn-based actions. The Untap step and (nearly always also) the Cleanup step only consist out of turn-based actions, therefore no priority is passed to any player and no abilities/spells can be played. The Draw step, Declare attackers step, Declare blockers step and Combat damage step each start with a turn-based action that can't be interacted with, then priority is given to the player whose turn it is. Keep in mind that sorcery speed abilities or cards (sorceries, creatures, artifacts, enchantments, lands, planeswalker, loyalty abilities …) can only be played in your own turn's main phases. In contrast to that instant speed abilities/spells can be played in any phase of any players turn. This should visualize how powerful instants are especially in multiplayer.

The Command Zone Episode 267 explains the priority and stack system for multiplayer games, having a Magic judge as a guest. If you've got further questions look at either the MTG Wiki or Magicjudges.org, were there also are judges who answer your questions in real time directly in a chat. I also recommend trying out the free to play game MTG Arena, to learn in a playful way how the priority system, the stack and the turn structure work.

Statistics

This last part only shows statistics for commander as well as some deduced conclusions and comments from a few Command Zone episodes. The statistics in this first section are from the [Command Zone Episode 335](#)[2]. These stats are generated by evaluating 109 commander games played by 4 people with decks of power level 6 - 8. As this is a rather small sample size, interpret the results more as indicators than the one and only truth. The Command Zone spoiled that they are working on a new big statistics episode for which over 1000 games will be evaluated.

Game length (in turns)[2]:   10.29

- Be careful, at about turn 8 the first players will or should being knocked out.

Times you **cast your commander** (per game)[2]:   1.4

When the base mana cost of commander is	2:	1.86
	3 - 4:	1.47
	5 - 6:	1.30
	7+:	0.77

- Commanders that have low mana cost tend to be less powerful so they don't get removed that often. The higher the mana cost of a commander the more impactful its effect should be but the less the deck should rely on the commander to work as he will come out late. Protect him if he's crucial. Removing your opponents' commander is often worth it.

Spells hard cast with **mana cost** 7+ (per game)[2]:   2.38

- So only 0.6 spells of mana cost 7+ per player per game. If you put in spells with mana cost 7+ they have to be worth it (**reliable** and powerful). Care for your mana curve! High mana cost cards are dead cards in the early game. In late game you often want to keep mana open so casting expensive spells is dangerous (counter spells) and/or difficult.

Attacks per player (per game)[2]:   2.86

by the most attacking player (per game)[2]:   5.25

- Having effective blockers often discourages the most attacking player to target you (deathtouch, flying).

Board wipes (per game)[2]: 1.32

- Board wipe often sets another player than the current one into the lead, don't forget the high costs for you when casting it (you're often the last one recovering from it).

Win Percentages

In this last section based on the [Command Zone Episodes 238](#)/[239](#)[1] the stats are generated by evaluating 313 commander games that are accessible on YouTube. The power level of the games varies. All of them were 4 player games only. The basic win percentage of every player is set to 25%.

Player **turn order**[1]:

> Player 1: 30%
>
> Player 2: 23%
>
> Player 3: 23%
>
> Player 4: 23%

- There is the natural advantage of being the one to be "1 mana and 1 card" up. Being the first player normally doesn't make you the target which leads to a big advantage.

Playing **turn 1 Sol Ring**/Mana Crypt[1]: 21.6%

- Having an early big mana advantage normally makes you the target for other players. Play them only if you will use them effectively.

Number of lands of winning players[1]: 10.9

> losing players[1]:   9.0

Person with most lands in play at the end of the game[1]: 42%

> not the most lands[1]: 18%

- The number of lands gives a hint about the average amount of turns in commander games. It also shows the power of land based ramp vs. artifacts/creature based ramp because many commander groups don't play land mass destruction cards. Hitting a land drop per turn and having enough card draw to do it is important. Threat assessment should not only be about what is on the board, but also about amount of available mana and hand cards.
- Of course knocking out players earlier prevents them from playing lands and therefore changes the stats in this results favor.

Deck Type (only small sample sizes)[1]:

Creature (25+ creatures in the deck):	25%
Artifact (25+ artifacts in the deck):	16%
Enchantment (20+ enchantments in the deck):	16%
Instant/Sorcery (25+ instant/sorceries in the deck):	28%
Planeswalker (15+ planeswalkers in the deck):	44%
Balanced (in none of the categories above):	26%

- Don't take these numbers as given! It's a small sample size especially with only 4 decks in the planeswalker category. But think of it in this way: creatures are often necessary to win (or not lose, look at the next stat point), instant/sorcery decks don't commit so many permanents to the board and are therefore harder to interact with/stop from what they want to do as permanents (such as enchantments and artifacts) can be board wiped, planeswalker decks tend to out value other decks when they have 3+ planeswalkers on the board.

Players **eliminated** by[1]:

Combat damage:	48%
Non-combat but non-combo:	27%
Combo:	11%
Commander damage:	6%
Infect:	3%
Mill:	3%
Other:	2%

- These numbers may not be representative for your meta/playgroup (data is from 4 different YouTube channels/metas).

Most **expensive** deck winning[1]:   29%

Average cost of winning decks (in $)[1]:   568

of losing decks (in $)[1]:   509

- In the statistics presented by the Command Zone decks with the price between 300 $ and 700 $ had the highest win percentage, even higher than 1000+ $ decks. Having the most expensive deck still often gives you an advantage in powerful cards and therefore a win percentage increase. But adding original duals lands or other expensive cards statistically is less impactful than being the first one to start the game (see player turn order)! It's more important to focus on deck synergy than on single expensive cards. But still assess threats correctly – a Gaea's Cradle is an expensive card that gives a big mana advantage!

Colors in your deck (Data from the end of 2018)

Having this color in your commander deck changes your win percentage[1]:
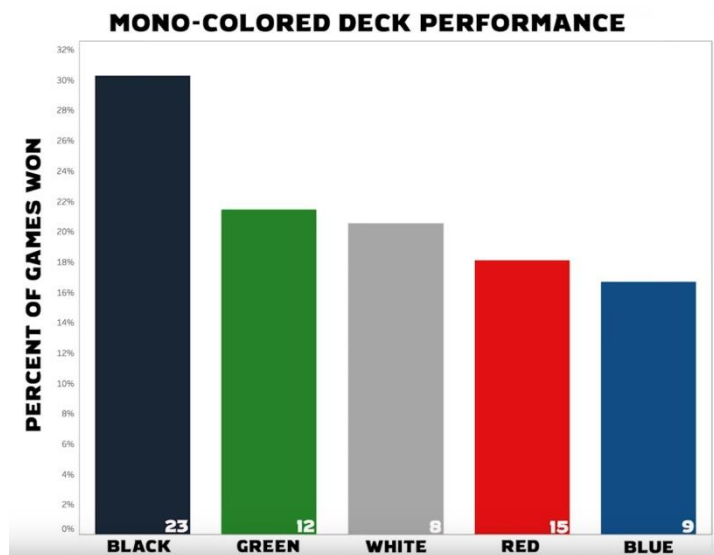
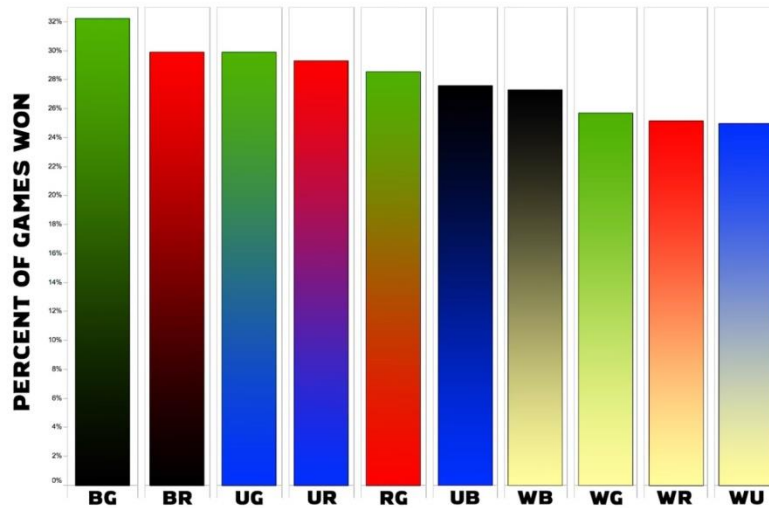Black   +5%

Green   +4.5%

Blue   +3%

Red   +1%

White   -4%
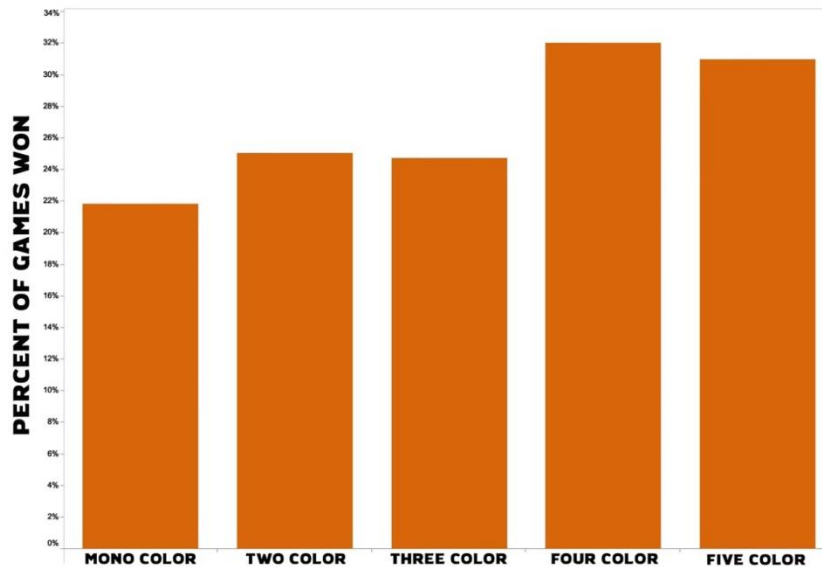
Mono colored deck win percentages (small sample size)[1]:

Color pairing win percentage (can also have other colors in addition)[1]:

COLORS APPEARING IN THE SAME DECK TOGETHER

Number of colors win percentage (low sample size for 4 - 5 color decks)[1]:

WHAT IS THE OPTIMAL NUMBER OF COLORS?

- Each color in Magic has its strengths and weaknesses. Playing the color white seems to give you the worst win probability which is also reflected in the color pairing combinations. Reasons for why there might be this order of **black** > **green** > **blue** > **red** > **white** could be, that some colors have less weaknesses and bigger strengths. One obvious reason should be that black, green and blue have good card draw effects which red and white lack. Remember that this data is from 2018. In the meantime most commander players agree in green currently (2020) being the strongest color in Magic.

Black uses life as a resource and has great tutors, board wipes and discard effects, limiting their enemies resources, only has a hard time removing artifacts and enchantments.

Green has the best ramp and normally the biggest board presence. Green also has no real weaknesses apart from not having good (creature) board wipes.

Blue has the best card draw and strong instants (like counter spells) but often doesn't commit too many permanents onto the board, which can be good (not removable), but also bad (no creatures to attack/block). Mill decks still have problems to win in commander.

Red has the problem that burn and aggro decks tend not to be the most powerful in commander.

White has no big strength compared to other colors apart from some protection spells and board wipes. This color is interesting in multi-colored decks because of its few strong cards and the rest can be of other colors.

- Mono-colored decks really suffer from their weaknesses as those can be equalized in multi-colored deck by the other colors. Mono-black decks are the only ones with a win percentage of above 25%.

- Specific colors seem to have a very strong interaction. Decks containing the color combination of **black**/**green** statistically won 32% of their matches. A special mention should be the Simic (**blue**/**green** only) decks that had a win percentage of 39% in the statistics.

- The sample size for 4 - 5 color decks was very low so look at the percentages with caution. 4 - 5 color decks are still powerful and can use (almost) all good cards of each color supporting their strategy. This can also make them hard to build as there are so many choices to make and the mana base is a challenge. The easier to build mana base also might be a reason for why 2 color decks have a slightly higher win chance than 3 color decks. The majority of decks have only 2 - 3 colors.

Your conclusion

- What did you like?

- What didn't you like so much?

- What was the most interesting to learn?

- What will you try out?

- On which topic would you like to know more about?

Please give me any feedback, I will appreciate it. :)