The Three Factors of the Optimal Deck

Thousands of powerful decks are built each day for Magic: the Gathering's Commander format; how then, are those decks made? For clarification, Commander is a 100 card format where a deck is singleton, meaning it can only have one copy of a card in it as opposed to the usual four. Of those 100 cards, 99 are in the main deck, and the other is the commander. A commander is a legendary creature that is always available to cast, if it is not in play. Now that context has been provided there are many factors to the question of how to build a powerful deck for this format. How many lands, the economy that the game is built upon, should be put in a deck? How much ramp, cards that increase a landbase, should be put in a deck? How much card draw should be in the deck? How long can the deck afford to set up? How does a deck balance the power of its individual cards to its consistency? The biggest three factors to think about when making a deck are simple. Strong decks in Magic: The Gathering are strong because they have a fast start, proportional construction, and an attainable endgame.

A Deck Must Have a Fast Start

One of the key aspects to any game of commander is the first couple of turns. The fastest player to have their start done has a massive head start. Every turn a player can get ahead of their opponent counts.

A Deck Must Set Up Quickly

In order for a deck to compete with the other decks effectively it needs to get off the ground at an appropriate time. The setup turns usually consist of players ramping. The act of ramping is playing cards to increase the amount of mana that the deck generates a turn and mana is the resource used to cast cards in the game. The community agrees that the average number of start up turns for commanders is 3 or 4 turns, although there are outliers such as decks with

abnormally high or low average mana values. Each card in Magic requires a specific amount of mana to play, and the mana value of a card is how much mana it costs to play. Think of it like a race; before the race the racers prepare to run, and then when it is time they take off. The setup turns for a game of commander are the prep time of the deck where everything is getting ready to go; if the deck is not ready by the time it needs to start executing its plan that puts it at a significant disadvantage. The deck will underperform compared to other decks at the table as it continues to set up while the other decks begin to execute their gameplans.

A Deck Must Reach the Target Mana Value

The average mana value is important to a commander deck. It helps dictate how many lands to add, how much ramp should be in the deck, and also what cards would be wise or unwise to put in the deck. By the end of the start up turns it is important to be able to produce an amount of mana equal to the average mana value of the deck, or at least close enough for the deck to start executing its plan the turn after the set up turns. In order to do this a deck needs to use a ramp. A prominent content creator in the commander community Tomer Abramovici (2020) recommends, "...50 mana sources is about the right number for most decks to shoot for, usually 37 lands and 13 ramp sources…" The amount of ramp in a deck will change a small amount depending on the average mana value of the deck. The higher the mana value the more ramp needed to reach that point, and vice versa.

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A Deck Must be Proportionally Constructed

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Having a fast start and a game plan is good, but there must be logic to the deck. In order for a deck to function at its best it needs to be constructed in a way which increases the chance to have the deck function as intended by making sure the chance of drawing a certain card is where it needs to be.

A Deck Must Have an Adequate Landbase

In order to function a deck needs a landbase. A deck's landbase is the lands in the deck. Lands in Magic: The Gathering generate mana, the game's resource used to cast spells, the game's term for playing cards. Therefore filling the deck to the brim with lands is the correct course of action, right? That statement is not necessarily true. In the deck there also must be cards to play with those lands, therefore there must be a balance of land and non-land cards in the deck. Most veteran players recommend a couple cards more than a third of the deck should be lands as a starting point. A prominent writer for EDHREC, Brian Cain (2024) said, "I would recommend starting with somewhere between 36-38 lands…" Having this many lands in a deck will prevent a "mana drought" where one does not draw enough lands and "mana floods" where a player is unable to play cards because they keep drawing lands.

A Deck Must Have Efficient Card Advantage

Often players run out of cards in hand, and that is where card advantage, sometimes called card draw comes into play. A piece of card advantage is a card that gives the player access to one or more additional cards to play. Whilst there are multiple varieties of card advantage the type of card drawn usually doesn't matter. The common consensus of how much card advantage to run in a deck is 10 pieces of card advantage. Says prominent Magic writer Kendra Snead (2024), "Regardless of your Commander's abilities, you should run at least 10 effective card draw cards or card advantage spells…" If a deck has little or no card advantage it eventually grinds to a halt as the amount of cards it plays exceeds the amount it draws. This leads to a terrible position called "top-decking". This is when the deck is relying on the top card of the deck to be something that would be useful. Sometimes though the type of card advantage in the deck does matter. Two examples of this are Prosper, Tome Bound, a legendary creature who

reads, "Whenever you play a card from exile, create a treasure token," and Niv-Mizzet, Parun, a legendary creature who reads,"Whenever you draw a card, Niv-Mizzet Parun deals 1 damage to any target." A deck needs to have a card advantage to play at an efficient rate, and when applicable the card advantage must match the strategy of the deck.

<p align="center">**A Deck Must Have an Attainable Endgame**</p>

In order to finish the game there must be some sort of plan for how to win. Without this a deck is a miscellaneous pile of cards that do not coordinate. Decks like that only win once in a blue moon, if ever.

A Deck Must be Able to Finish The Game

The creator of a deck must have a clear plan for how to eliminate the opponents in mind when building a deck. Even with the fastest start and the most proportional construction a deck must have a clear way to eliminate the opposing decks, otherwise it is like a car with gas in the tank and a brand new shell, but without an engine it is not going anywhere. In fact that is a common piece of terminology used to describe how a deck wins the game, its engine. In a commander deck its engine is often centered around its commander. The commander should highlight the strategy of the deck because it's almost always able to be used, but the deck should be able to function without it, otherwise the engine becomes held together by a single pin. When that pin is removed the whole thing falls apart, and then the deck implodes. The commander is the guide for what the deck plans to do, and then it assists in executing that plan. During the deck building process, pieces that are contrary to the deck's plan should also be omitted. As Magic Principal Designer Gavin Verhey (2018) said, "In Magic, there are enough forms of conflict to deal with(…) Don't let your deck also conflict with itself." For example, if the deck's plan is to

gain a lot of life, cards that prevent life gain should be omitted in order to more align with the deck's strategy. Without a game plan a deck has no way to win the game regularly.

A Deck Must be Consistent

Now that the deck has a plan for how it will end the game, how is that plan achieved? Consistency, the ability for the deck to execute its game plan every game, is key to any good deck. In order to make it to the endgame the deck must be able to make it to its game plan. One good deck building idea is to include many cards with similar effects in a deck. If the deck's strategy is to gain life, it should not have only a single way to gain life; it should have many alternatives. A deck includes alternatives to a card so that it is more likely to be drawn during a game. A popular card to put in life gain decks is Soul Warden, which reads, "Whenever a creature enters the battlefield, you gain 1 life." There are many alternatives to Soul Warden which should be put in the deck so as to make it more likely to draw a card with the same or a similar effect. A secondary benefit of putting multiple similar copies of a card in a deck is that the same effect can be stacked for more value. For example instead of gaining 1 life when a creature enters a player would gain 2 life because they have both Soul Warden and a similar card in play. Sometimes a deck has a strategy that uses niche cards without alternatives. An example of this is the combo between Exquisite Blood, a card that reads, "Whenever an opponent loses life, you gain that much life", and Sanguine Bond, a card that reads, "Whenever you gain life an opponent loses that much life." Both pieces of this combo are very niche, have few alternatives, and can be hard to draw in a deck of 99 cards. This is where tutors come in. Tutors are cards that search the deck for a card and put them into hand. On top of this, those combo pieces can be removed from the board by opponents, so an ideal inclusion in a deck is recursion. Cards categorized as recursion allow a player to reuse cards that otherwise could not be reused. An

example is a card that returns a creature from a player's graveyard, where cards go when they are no longer in play, to that player's hand. This allows a deck to take an important piece and reuse it instead of it going to waste. Incorporating all of these deck building strategies helps make the deck much more consistent.

Rebuttal

Many people say that in order for a deck to be strong its commander must be strong as well because it is the most available. This is not true. While a strong commander can lead to a strong deck A commander deck can be powerful without having some insane commander. It is all about how the deck has been constructed. If the deck has an endgame in mind and can reach that endgame efficiently it can be powerful. Another facet that many people emphasize is removal. Removal is important to play as it can stop powerful threats from easily overpowering a deck. It is not the most important part of a deck though. As Bolt the Bird writer Ben Guilfoyle (2023) says, "When deckbuilding I generally consider running four to eight pieces of removal." A deck's power does not rely on removal or a strong commander.

Conclusion

In short, there are many facets of deck building in Magic: The Gathering. The most important things to consider when creating a deck are getting to a fast start, being proportionally constructed, and having an attainable endgame. When done correctly these things create a powerful deck. Once these changes are taken to the table, decks which were once slow and aimless can now punch through even the strongest of other decks and lead even a new player to take the game.

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